

Esoteric dimensions of the Shia Faith

Body and soul are the two components of human beings; one is the husk and the outer shell while the other is the kernel and an inner spirit. Both dimensions need nourishment as well as protection. Almighty God says; *And the soul and Him Who made it perfect, Then He inspired it to understand what is right and wrong for it; He will indeed be successful who purifies it, And he will indeed fail who corrupts it* (91:7-10). Each human being has the potential of soaring to the level higher than that of the angels and that top place in the pyramid of God's creation can only be reached by developing one's spiritual dimension.

Islām guides humans on both planes of their being: the ritual as well as the spiritual. The Prophet Muhammad (s) instructed the people on simple matters of hygiene, such as cleanliness, *wudu'* and *ghusl*, as well as on loftier matters of spiritual ascension; he urged his followers to be physically strong to defend themselves in battle-fields and also charted for them the heavenly path of spiritual wayfaring. After the death of the Prophet, regrettably the majority of Muslims were unable to combine the ritual and the spiritual dimensions in their religious life.

But there was a minority which maintained, preserved, and spread the wholeness of Islāmic teachings, and that was the Shī'ah strand of Islām headed by the Imāms from the family of the Prophet, the *Ahlul Bayt*. Shī'ism emerged as the natural product of Islām which combined within itself its ritual as well as the spiritual dimensions. It is a path whose theology, jurisprudence, and spirituality flow from the same spring, the *Ahlul Bayt*. And, therefore, you will observe that the Shī'ah very rarely felt the need to form distinct spiritual fraternities like the Sūfīs among the Sunnis.

A Shī'ī Muslim refers for all his religious guidance—from theology to jurisprudence, from ritual or spiritual—to the *Ahlul Bayt*. Even if he just follows the rituals with understanding and comprehension, he will be led to the spiritual path. For example, a simple recitation of the Du'ā' Kumayl, taught by Imām 'Alī, elevates a Shī'ī from the basic level of worshipping God out of fear [*khamf*] to the level of worshipping God out of love [*hubb*]. And so there is no wonder when we see that almost all the Sūfī fraternities trace their chain of masters back to one or the other Imām of *Ahlul Bayt*.

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Shī'ite Islām represents a balancing totality of various points of view. Due to the profoundly esoteric character of its doctrine, it represents a “middle path” between the excessive formal legalism of the jurists and the excessive introversion of the mystics. The *tasawwuf*, in the Sunnī world, can be defined spiritually as the Shī'ism of 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib, the Fourth Caliph and First Imām of Islām. Both Sūfism and Shī'ism, in accord with the traditions of the Prophet, view 'Alī as the “gate” of initiation to the esoteric knowledge [*bātin*] of Muhammad who stated quite clearly: “I am the city of knowledge and 'Alī is its gate. Whoever wants to enter this city must first pass through its gate.”

The symbol of the “gate” alludes to the esoteric function of the First Imām since it is through him that one gains access to initiation [from the Latin *inire* or to “enter”]. Found in many traditions, the “gate” alludes to initiation into the Muhammadan “mysteries” or “secrets”.

In the Shī'ī view, the Imāms are the fundamental pillars of Islām in the sense that the essence of the revelation was passed on to them by the Prophet, both exoterically and esoterically, through the

function of the Imāmate or spiritual inheritance that is, the esoteric guidance of the prophetic *bāṭin* [secrets].

According to the famous *hadīth al-keisā'* [The Tradition of the Cloak], the Prophet called his daughter Fātimah along with 'Alī, Hasan, and Husayn, and covered them completely with his cloak. This act symbolized the transmission of the universal *wilāyah* of the Prophet, through the epiphany [*mazḥar*] of the partial *wilāyah* [*wilāyah fātimīyyah*], to the plethora of the Twelve Imāms, the Prophet's immaculate progeny [*ma'sūmin*].

In order for there to be a “return to the fundamentals” of Islām, it is also necessary for there to be a universal restoration of the esoteric sciences in all of their traditions. For that same metaphysical reason, it requires a man who, besides being inspired by God and being a perfect interpreter who masters the exoteric and the esoteric scripture, is a spiritual heir, an inheritor and direct descendant of the Prophet from the line of Husayn, the Third Imām.

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Extracted from: *Shiite Islam: Orthodoxy or Heterodoxy?* by Luis Alberto Vittor