

Imamah and Wilayah as Metaphysical Realities

(Extracted from Chapter 7, Shiite Islam: Orthodoxy or Heterodoxy? By Luis Alberto Vittor)

Whoever examines the Islāmic accounts of the period will notice with great surprise that the sector of Muslims who proclaimed Abū Bakr as the First Caliph in the *saqīfah* soon lost the esoteric and spiritual significance of the Imāmate or the Caliphate, if they ever possessed it at all. For them, spiritual authority and temporal power were united in the person of Muhammad by the fact that he was the Messenger of God and the Intercessor between God and man.

When it came to Imām 'Alī, he was viewed by the old oligarchy, in the best of cases, as merely a half-Muhammad, blessed with an inspired character and the spiritual wisdom of a prophet. They did not, however, consider him fit to assume the functions of legal administrator and political leader. For the followers of 'Alī, among whom were the closest and most famous companions of the Prophet, this separation between spiritual authority and temporal power was intolerable. It was not so much the political Imāmate that 'Alī inherited from Muhammad which drew the Shī'ah. Rather, it was the esoteric sense of the Prophethood that continued to pulse within him: Imāmate was the amplification of Prophethood, a more interiorized complement.

According to Shī'ite thought, divine guidance takes two forms: *nubuwwah* and *wilāyah*. The first is co-substantial to the “Muhammadan Truth” [*al-haqīqah al-muhammadiyyah*], in an absolute, integral, primordial, pre-eternal, and post-eternal sense. The second is constituted by the partial realities of the first: its emissions and luminous epiphanies [*mazhar*]. In other words, the Imāms of the Prophetic Household who initiated and continued the “Cycle of Initiation” [*dā'irat al-nubuwwah*] that was sealed by the Prophet and which, like his luminaries, are identified with the pleroma of the “Light of Light” [*nūr al-anwār*] of the “Muhammadan Light” [*al-nūr al-muhammadi*].

From this metaphysical point of view, the Twelve Imāms belong, in their condition of luminous epiphanies of “Muhammadan Light,” to the same spiritual and temporal category as the Prophet without them been truly and properly prophets. This notion is repeated in many *ahādīth* [traditions] in relation to 'Alī, like the one which says “You are to me as Aaron was to Moses except there will be no prophet after me” (Bukhārī, Muslim, Hākim, Sadūq, Mufīd, Kulaynī).

The bond that exists between Muhammad and 'Alī goes far beyond that of blood. What exists between them is a special spiritual tie [*nisbah ma'nawiyyah*] which surpasses the relation of impossibility that “there will be no prophet after me.” The bond between Muhammad and 'Alī is the result of their common pre-existence in eternity where they were two spiritual entities united in the same luminous identity.

As Prophet has explained in various *ahādīth*, “'Alī and I are from the same Light” (Kulaynī, Majlisī, Ma'sūm 'Alī) “People are from various trees, but 'Alī and I are from the same Tree” (Tirmidhī, Ibn al-Maghazalī).

In relation to this Shī'ite doctrine of the “Muhammadan Light” there is a *hadīth* from the Prophet which affirms he and 'Alī are two identical and pre-existing lights that God manifested separately and simultaneously during the “reign” of Adam and in the hidden worlds.

After having passed from one “reign” to another they were finally placed in the persons of Hasan and Husayn who were, simultaneously, two luminous epiphanies that emanated from the “Primordial Light” through which the “Lord of the Worlds” [*rabb al-ʿālamīn*] illuminated all of creation through the “light of the logos” [*nūr al-kalām*]. This “primordial light” protects the Prophet and the Imāms from sin, making them immaculate [*ma'sūmīn*]. At the same time, it confers on them the status of supremacy of the poles [*aqṭāb*] of the universe and vicars [*khalīfah*] of God as well as spiritual legatees [*wasī*] of the *bāṭin* [esoteric aspects] of the scripture.

As the Imāms have stated, “We are the first and the last. We are the logos of God. We are the executors of the revelation.” As can be seen, the parallel between Moses' position and that which Muhammad would occupy in later times becomes evident in light of these words.

The Caliph is not, however, in the eyes of most Sunnī scholars, the successor to the spiritual office of the Prophet, the executor of his *bāṭin* or the esoteric interpreter of the word of God. This interpretation, however, is inconsistent with the meaning of the word *wilāyah* which appears to indicate that the function of the Prophet was not destined to disappear after his death but rather, on the contrary, to continue by means of the spiritual authority and temporal power of the Imāms until the end of times.