

## Spirituality of Shi'ite Islam

Muslim spirituality is the characteristic of the spiritual journey of Islam from the outward to the inward—a hermeneutic trail of openings to insights and unveilings. Human beings set out on the spiritual journey by entering into a covenant with God and at the invitation of God. Entering into the covenant is a kind of initiation by which God brings the person or people initiated onto the path toward Him. It is a path of return to the origin.

The Muslim becomes spiritual as the mirror of the soul is polished to reflect the image of God that was hidden beneath the dust that covered it. The heart is the receptacle for divine grace. God grants his grace to the human heart through guidance by which the heart finds its way, understands its wrong turns, and "sees" the right direction. In order for the heart to function properly, however, one must cleanse it, or polish it, or chop away the debris that covers it, and this is accomplished by wielding the double-edged sword of *dhikr* (remembrance) and *fikr* (contemplation). In Shi'i spirituality, it is not uncommon for military imagery to be taken to symbolize various facets of the inner journey.

The initiatic aspect of the religious life becomes especially prominent in Shi'i Islam. The divine guide is one who can lead us back to the unseen realm from which we came, on a path whose goal is the divine encounter (*liqa Allah*). Initiation takes place on various levels and may be considered as a kind of vocation or divine appointment. Initiation normally marks the beginning of a spiritual training or wayfaring, but in the case of the prophets and Imams, the training takes place prior to the formal beginning of their mission. At the highest level, there is the calling and appointment of the Prophet Muhammad (s). Even the Prophet is guided by God along a spiritual path.

The Shi'ite Imams are each appointed by God, and this appointment is announced by the Prophet and then by each Imam in succession. The prophets and Imams are all able to guide others because of the guidance they have been given through which they acquire moral excellence and knowledge of the unseen (*ghayb*). Ordinary people only see the exterior of things or their surfaces (*zahir*), while the divine guides lead people to knowledge of the interior or inward aspects of things (*batin*). The spiritual path is one that takes the adept from the world of exterior things to an interior world, a world of hidden meanings, and traveling this path builds character.

The difference between Sunni and Shi'i Islam is often portrayed as a disagreement over the political leadership of the Muslim community after the Prophet; and it is alleged that the Shi'a believe in something like royal succession through an inherited right to rulership. However, the issue of communal leadership is only the manner in which a more fundamental difference came to the surface. The more fundamental difference is the religious authority the Shi'a attribute to the Imams on the basis of their selection, esoteric knowledge, and precedence in virtue. So, we could say that the most fundamental characteristic of Shi'ite spirituality is the particular way in which the Shi'a view what in contemporary English is called spirituality, for what distinguishes the Shi'a is precisely the belief that the spiritual life of Islam—individually and collectively—can only be sustained through the guidance of the Imams.

S. H. M. Jafri concludes his study of *The Origins and Development of Shi'a Islam* with this comment: "The actual disagreements between the Shi'is and the Sunnis in certain details of theology and legal practices were not as important as the "Spirit" working behind these rather minor divergences. This "Spirit", arising from the differences in the fundamental approach and interpretation of Islam, issued

forth in the Shi'i concept of leadership of the community after the Prophet. It is this concept of divinely-ordained leadership which distinguishes Shi'i from Sunni within Islam...'.

The idea of the Imam as one who can lead others to a correct understanding of the Qur'an is only but one instance of the general function of the Imam as divine guide, but it is a pivotal one. The knowledge possessed by the Imams and by which they guide is an esoteric knowledge, not only in the sense that it involves going beyond the surface literal meaning to a deeper meaning, but in the sense that this knowledge cannot be completely communicated to anyone but the next Imam, and the guidance of the Imams must be calibrated so as to impart only as much knowledge as the follower has the capacity to receive.

The ability to understand hidden meanings is not merely an aptitude for textual hermeneutics, for the Qur'an itself repeatedly enjoins its readers to think, to reason, and in other ways to ponder on the signs of God as they appear in nature, history, and all creation. Reason ('*aql*') is seen as a gift of God. One can acquire knowledge, but not reason. In an important narration, Imam Musa Kazim ('a) presents reason as a faculty for perception of divinity, insight, and a light in the heart that enables one to recognize and understand the signs of Allah. The degree of reason possessed by the believer is sufficient for him to recognize that the prophets and Imams are in possession of knowledge ('*ilm*'), and hence to seek guidance from them.

The spiritual journey is symbolized through pilgrimages (*ziyarat*, literally visitations) to the shrines of the *Ma'sumin* and members of their families or other notable descendants. There people seek the intercession of the divine guides, read devotions, and picnic and watch children run around. The shrines also serve as places where mourning ceremonies are held and holidays are publicly celebrated. The shrines are sacred spaces, but the spirit one finds at them is less one of solemnity and more one of an unburdening of need expressed through formal and informal supplications.

Supplications play an important role in public and personal devotions and may be purely inward or expressed verbally. True supplication requires attention of the heart, whether or not accompanied by spoken words. When supplication takes place with the attention of the heart, its effect on the heart is to produce a spiritual state (*hal*). The recitation of special supplications attributed to the *Ma'sumin* is especially valued and such supplications serve as models by which to learn the proper etiquette of prayer and intimate conversation with God. Supplication encourages the supplicant to turn his attention inward, to recognize his own sinfulness, to seek refuge in God, and to ask for his own forgiveness and for the forgiveness of others. One also prays that the prayers of others will be answered.

In the visual arts, geometrical figures indicate intellectual abstraction, and the mirroring of patterns in carpets, architecture and calligraphy reflects the soul's mirroring of divinity. Floral themes with birds symbolize the flight of the mystic toward divine beauty. A central underlying theme expressed in many variations can symbolize divine unity and its manifestations. Often a phrase of the Qur'an, a Name of God, or an appellation of one of the *Ma'sumin* is hidden in brickwork, or in calligraphy, in such a way that it can only be deciphered after some study; and this, too, reflects the spiritual quest and the esoteric truth.

Another feature of practical Shi'ite spirituality is *intizar*, which means waiting or expectation, and is associated with the belief that the Mahdi, the twelfth Shi'ite Imam, is alive but in occultation. The Shi'a

are encouraged to await the appearance of the hidden Imam, and in the practical Sufism of the Shi'a, this means not only to expect the outward appearance of the hidden Imam, but also to prepare oneself by seeking the grace to be a worthy companion of the Imam, with consciousness that he may be hidden in the appearance of the least among us.

As the seeker awaits the companionship of the Imam, he should also develop companionship with others who are involved in the spiritual journey, and should attune his interests to the personalities of those more advanced on the path, especially the Prophet and his folk (s), who are known as the fourteen impeccable ones (*ma'sumin*).

Observing the customs of one's society, proper etiquette and morals is seen at one level as a prerequisite for following the spiritual path under the guidance of the divinely appointed guide. One conforms one's behavior to the principles of morality and Islamic law because without doing so, there can be no progress on the spiritual path. However, as one travels the path, further motivation is found for worship and love of God and respect and kindness to His creatures. As the heart becomes illuminated through the guidance of those appointed by God for this purpose, virtues appear as outward signs of steady travel on the path. In order for this to happen, the wayfarer (*salik*) must be continually engaged in the examination of conscience and in taking care that base motives do not get the upper hand.

As an aid in wayfaring, it is highly recommended to visit cemeteries and to ponder death. The intended effect of this is to instill the idea of the transience of worldly goods and strengthen the wayfarer's remembrance of God.

There are many other sorts of instructions for spiritual wayfaring, for example, regarding humility and a disdain for ostentation, repentance, how to keep proper attention during worship, recitation of the Qur'an, maintaining ritual purity, and other acts that go beyond the requirements of religious law.

The fruits of the spiritual life of Shi'ite Islam should be evident in all the pursuits of the believer.

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From: *Spirituality in Shi'i Islam: An Overview* by Hajj Muhammad Legenhausen

<https://www.al-islam.org/spirituality-shii-islam-overview-muhammad-legenhausen/spirituality-shii-islam-overview>