Period of the Presence of the Holy Imams (A.S.)

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General Objectives
After studying this discourse, students are expected:
1. To know the origin of the Sunnī and Shī‘ah schools of thought and their main differences on the issue of Imamate;
2. To be acquainted with the manner of selecting the Imāms and their continuity;
3. To understand the pivotal role of the Imāms in protecting the foundation of religion, guiding the Muslims and propagating religious teachings; and
4. To be aware of the Shī‘ah viewpoint on the savior and the constructive effect of waiting during the period of occultation.

Introduction
Clarification of the principle of Imamate and the circumstances surrounding its inclusion in the intellectual body of a group of Muslims (Shī‘ah) as one of their ideological principles lies in paying attention to the following points:

1. Based on the monotheistic worldview, the One and Only God is the Creator of the universe and the Master and Cherisher of the entire creation including humanity. This is called "monotheism in Lordship" [tawḥīd fī’r-rubūbiyyah]. Accordingly, for a religious and monotheist person, God has the right to rule over human beings and assign duties to them such that every person has duties to God and there is no escape but to discharge them.

Therefore, God has the legislative right [ḥaqq-e tashrī‘ī] and the people, in turn, are duty-bound to submit and surrender to Him. On the one hand, the principle of monotheism gives this right solely to God and it is wrong for people to associate this right to any other than Him. If we believe someone else to have such a right, we have actually drifted away from "monotheism in sovereignty" [tawḥīd fī’l-ḥākimiyyah], and once we obey the command of other than God, we fall into the abyss of "polytheism in obedience" [shirk fī’ṭ-ṭā‘ah].

On the other hand, the requisite of the acceptance of monotheism is the all-encompassing legislative sovereignty of God in the sense that human beings cannot accept the sovereignty of God only in some decrees or in a specific domain; rather, one should abide by every commandment of God, the Sublime, in every sphere.

2. God has exercised His legislative sovereignty by sending prophets and issuing orders and decrees through them. However, if the religion is meant to put Divine Sovereignty into action, as it is, and its ultimate goal is the implementation of religious commandments, such a goal is in need of prerequisites and special conditions apart from conveyance of the message.

Historically, the tasks done by the prophets of God have been more than the conveyance and elucidation of revelation. Their incessant struggles and untiring efforts were not only confined to communication of a message. In fact, the prophets (‘a) strived hard for the Divine Sovereignty in different facets of life. The loftiest of the goals and objectives of the prophets (‘a) was the emancipation of man from the bondage of the ṭāghūt1 and drawing him to the servitude and worship of God.

3. For the monotheistic logic to rule over the life of man, first of all, we are in need of revelation and the conveyance of the message which is the primary function and duty of the prophets of Allah (prophethood). We are also in need of the elucidation, exposition and teaching of the conveyed message so as to avoid difference of interpretations (religious authority). In addition, there is a need for an executive and administrative institution to actually implement the religious commandments (leadership).

4. When the Holy Prophet

#7779;) was alive, apart from conveying the revelation, which is a prophetic function, he practically assumed two other responsibilities. In case of any difference of opinions on a religious matter, his view and opinion served as the final word. He, who recited the Qur’an to the people, considered it also his duty to explain it to them and state the rulings and cases not explicitly

mentioned in the Qur'an. This task of the Apostle

ṣ) was actually complimentary to his role of receiving the revelation. As such, the Sunnah was of special importance and played the role of explainer and elucidator of the Qur'an. This is the same function of "religious authority" [marja'iyyat−e dīnī] which was also performed by the Holy Prophet

ṣ).

The station of wilāyah2 and leadership was among the designations of the Prophet Muḥammad

ṣ). Any decision he took for the ummah3 was binding. From the very beginning of his prophetic call, he took steps for the Islamic ummah to establish a government. His steps from the beginning to the end bore witness of the existence of a systematic program for the establishment of a religious government. The efforts made in Mecca were also a historical prelude for the establishment of a formal government in Medina. Purging of the internal enemies and the hypocrites in Medina and waging war against the infidels and foreign powers demonstrated the Muslims' motivation to establish a global government under the leadership of the Prophet Muḥammad

ṣ).

No Muslim at that time ever thought that the Prophet's

ṣ) duty was only to convey the message. His all−encompassing authority was such that there was no separation between religion and politics. In addition to the conveyance of revelation, the Prophet Muḥammad

ṣ) had two other responsibilities—intellectual authority and practical leadership of the Islamic ummah—exactly the same responsibilities shouldered by the Imāms ('a) after the Prophet

ṣ). Apart from being the recipient of revelation, the Prophet

ṣ) was also the Imām and proof of Allah [ḥujjat Allāh] for the people. His being the proof of Allah entailed responsibilities on the part of the people. Firstly, whatever the Prophet

#7779;) declared as lawful or unlawful—even though not explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an—became a duty upon the people. Secondly, whatever policy he as the leader adopted, was thereafter an inviolable administrative measure or decree. Whatever dispute, whether theoretical or practical, that was settled in the presence of the Holy Prophet

#7779;) subsequently the people had to "hold fast" [i'tiṣām] to it as "Allah's cord" [ḥabl Allāh].4

5. The Apostle

#7779;), therefore, had two functions, viz. apostleship [risālah] and leadership [imāmah]. With the declaration of the finality of prophethood by God, risālah culminated with the Prophet Muḥammad

#7779;) and the people were not supposed to look for another prophet after him. Until the end of the world, all must adhere to one religion—Islam—and its heavenly book —the Qur'an—must be the basis of religion. However, after the demise of the Holy Prophet

#7779;), this question was raised: With the departure of the Prophet

#7779;), what is the designation of Imamate or religious authority and leadership [imāmah] of the Islamic ummah?

Shī'ism
Some believed that with the passing away of the Prophet

#7779;), leadership [imāmah]—in the sense of perfect interpretation of the religion—also came to an end. They believed that after the Prophet

#7779;), God did not designate anyone to be the flawless interpreter of the religion. In this case, divine leadership [imāmah] ended and thereafter the implementers of divine sovereignty were general vicegerents, viz. the people. As such, imāmah was not a divine designation in the sense that God had not appointed someone for the post.

Accordingly, the people had to assume the responsibility of religious authority and the function of interpreting the religion was delegated to them. The executive leadership of the people was determined by themselves.

Consultation and election was the means to determine the successor and caliph [khalīfah] of the Messenger

ṣ) for the performance of the function of leadership. In the course of time, this notion became prevalent: "The Messenger of Allah

ṣ) has entrusted to the people the affair of religious leadership."
On the contrary, according to another group, just as prophethood is a divine designation, leadership [imāmah] is also a divine covenant. They believed that "Sovereignty or rule is the right of God and He guarantees the perpetuity of His religion by designating the flawless interpreter and infallible leader after the Prophet

ṣ)." Proponents of the second view who are called Shī'ah are of the opinion that the institution of leadership [imāmah] has been determined and defined by God Himself through the Prophet

ṣ), and the people must abide by it.
According to the Shī'ah, twelve persons have been designated as the leaders of the ummah, interpreters of the religion and masters of the affairs, and the Qur'an also enjoins us to follow them.5 According to this view, the sovereignty of God is observed through the Imāms who are the vicegerents of God. All their commands are binding and their interpretation of the religion is the correct interpretation.
The two schools of thought—Sunnī and Shī'ah—are the two main trends in the Muslim world. The issue of Imamate is the main issue that has divided Muslims into two groups.6
These two schools of thought differ on some issues:
1. The Shī'ah regard the sayings and actions of the Ahl al-Bayt7 ('a), in addition to those of the Prophet

ṣ), as the decisive proof and criterion of truth. According to this view, after the Apostle

ṣ) a sort of religious authority based on "inspired knowledge" [al-'ilm al-ladunnī] is entrusted to the Imāms ('a). Through means beyond our

comprehension, the Imāms ('a) had acquired the Islamic sciences from the Holy Prophet

#7779;). Each of them then passed to his successor whatever he had inherited from the Prophet

#7779;).8
The Ahl as−Sunnah, however, assert that only the Prophet

#7779;) is infallible and only his sayings are devoid of any error, and none of his family members, companions and caliphs has such merit. As such, according to the Sunnīs the sayings of the Ahl al−Bayt ('a) are at most as authoritative as those of religious scholars.9 Hundreds of mistakes of the companions and caliphs have been recorded in Sunnī books.10

2. According to the Shī'ah, religious authority and leadership [imāmah] is a divine trust which must be determined by God. As such, Imamate is not a customary position or designation that depends on public acceptance and allegiance. It is rather a program set up by God for the guidance of mankind which does not necessitate the acceptance and approval of the people. Linking the fate of religion to the will of the people is tantamount to the mixture of the will of God with that of the people, and this is incompatible with the necessity of Imamate and the infinite wisdom of God. The commandments of God constitute His religion and Imamate, which in God's design for the guidance of humanity is an integral part of religion and one of the divine obligations. The people are duty−bound to implement this program. That is, the ummah has no option but to accept it and this acceptance is a religious obligation and a prerequisite of faith. From this perspective, there is no difference between nubuwwah and imāmah. All those who accepted prophethood [nubuwwah] must also accept Imamate [imāmah].

It is true that without the acceptance of the people, no program or design can be implemented successfully. Therefore, the materialization of Imamate depends on the will and approval of the people. It must be noted, however, that materialization is not identical with the rightfulness of a thing. According to the Shī'ah, some dimensions of the authority of the Imāms ('a) were not put into practice, but this does not nullify in any way the legitimacy of

Imamate. Similarly, the people's non-acceptance or denial of true prophets never affected the truthfulness of their messages.

According to Sunnī scholars, Imamate is an affair without any specified divine decree and religious authority can be assumed by common religious scholars. Leadership, therefore, is also an affair without any specified divine decree. They maintain that the caliph or Imām can be determined through general suffrage,11 appointment or designation by the preceding caliph,12 or by the use of force and violence.13

3. According to the Shī'ah, Imamate is one of the fundamental ideological principles which every Muslim must believe in and in which there is no room for emulation [taqlīd]. Since designation of the Imām is one of the prerogatives of God, it is one of the roots of religion [uṣūl ad-dīn] and scholastic theology ['ilm al-kalām] is its proper place for discussion.14 The Ahl as-Sunnah, however, who regard Imamate as an affair of the people without any specified divine decree include it in the list of secondary duties in jurisprudence and discuss it in the science of jurisprudence [fiqh].15

4. In view of the aforementioned points, the Shī'ah definition of Imamate is totally different from that of the caliphate or leadership by the Ahl as-Sunnah, where the issue of leadership and government is only an outward aspect of the functions of Imamate and is not comprehensive in all its aspects.16

5. Most of the Shī'ah give a special position to the Imāms ('a) in addition to their religious authority and political leadership. According to the Shī'ah, just as the legislative will of God is manifested through the infallible Imāms ('a), who are in charge of religious guidance and sociopolitical leadership of the people, they also have guardianship or authority [wilāyah] in the cosmic world ['ālam-e takwīnī] and serve as the medium between God and the people. According to this perspective on Imamate, the Imāms ('a) have a third function, i.e. esoteric imāmah. In other words, like the Prophet

#7779;), the Imāms ('a) are mediums of divine grace and, by the will of God, they have exceptional power over the world and mankind. Based on the Shī'ah teachings, the earth will not remain without the existence of a proof of Allah [ḥujjat Allāh]. The miracles shown by the infallible Imāms ('a) are signs of this kind of wilāyah.17

Notes:

1. – The term tāghūt applies to any idol, object, or individual that prevents men from doing what is good, and leads them astray. The term has been used eight times in the Qur'an. Prior to Islam, tāghūt had been the name of one of the idols of the Quraysh tribe. This name is used also to mean Satan. Moreover, the term is used to indicate one who rebels against lofty values, or who surpasses all bounds in his despotism and tyranny and claims the prerogatives of divinity for himself whether explicitly or implicitly. [Trans.]

2. – For further information about the idea of guardianship [wilāyah] and the guardian [wālī], see Murtadā Mutahharī, Wilāyah: The Station of the Master, trans. Yahyā Cooper (Tehran: World Organization for Islamic Services, 1982). [Trans.]

3. – Ummah: the entire Islamic community which knows no territorial, racial, national or ethnic distinction. [Trans.]

4. – See Sūrah Āli 'Imrān 3:103.

5. – Sūrah Nisā' 4:59: "O you who have faith! Obey Allah and obey the Apostle and those vested with authority among you."

6. – See Shahristānī, Al-Milal wa'n-Nihal, vol. 1, p. 24.

7. – Ahl al-Bayt: according to authentic hadīths recorded in both Sunnī and Shī'ah sources, the term Ahl al-Bayt, and interchangeably Itrah and Āl, is a blessed Qur'anic appellation that belongs exclusively to the Prophet, 'Alī, Fātimah, Hasan, and Husayn ('a). The members of this Family of five, with the Prophet Muhammad (s) at its head, were the ones present at the time the Qur'anic verses regarding their virtues were being revealed to the Prophet (s). However, nine other Imāms from the descendants of Imām al-Husayn ('a) are also included in this chosen Family, the final one being Imām al-Mahdī ('a). For further information, visit: http://www.al-islam.org/faq. [Trans.]

8. – Murtadā Mutahharī, Imāmat va Rahbarī [Imamate and Leadership], p. 52.

9. – See Sunnī books on the principles of jurisprudence and Sayyid 'Abd al-Ḥusayn Sharaf ad-Dīn al-Mūsawī, Al-Murājā'at, Correspondence 13.

10. – Mutahharī, Imāmat va Rahbarī, p. 53.

11. – Sa'ad ad-Dīn Taftāzānī, Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid, vol. 5, p. 233; Shahristānī,

Al-Milal wa'n-Nihal, vol. 1, p. 72.

12. – Abū'l-Ḥasan Māwardī, Al-Aḥkām as-Salṭāniyyah, p. 7.

13. – Taftāzānī, Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid, vol. 5, p. 233.

14. – 'Abd ar-Razzāq Lāhījī, Gawhār-e Murād, p. 467.

15. – Taftāzānī, Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid, vol. 5, p. 232.

16. – See Muṭahharī, Imāmat va Rahbarī, p. 70.

17. – See Uṣūl al-Kāfī, "Abwāb al-Ḥujjah"; Muṭahharī, Imāmat va Rahbarī,

p. 56.