Modernist Methodology of Islamic Research

Dr. Rehana Firdous*

The object of this article is to study briefly the major ideas developed by the modernists in justification of change in socio- cultural life as it is related to religion. The article focuses on the principle of change and its place in Islamic jurisprudence and modernist methodology, and the ways in which the modernists have tried to use this principles in connection with their special method in the study of *Shari'a* sources. In this article we are not dealing with the origins of Islamic law or its historical perspectives, but we shall focus our attention on those principles and methods which are introduced by the modernists to explain the Qur'anic texts, to elucidate the position of the Prophet's *Sunna*, to benefit from the classical views of the different Sunni schools of thought *(madhahib al-fiqh)* in formulating the Islamic laws. It should be clear here that the discussion of this methodology is based on both earlier and contemporary modernists writings.

1. The concept of the Shari'a

The term Shari'a can be defined as the body of laws given in the Qur'an and the *Sunna*[1]. As a specific term in Islamic literature, however, it means the guidance and laws of God which man chooses to pursue out of his freewill, to clean and satisfy himself. So it is a wider term that law *(Fiqh)* for it also involves the acceptance of faith. And the term din means obedience to the *Shari'a*. The Sharia is therefore the most comprehensive term of the religion of Islam. In examing this modernist metodology we must always bear in mind this vital difference between *Shari'a* and *Fiqh*[2].

Generally speaking the sources of Islamic law which have varying degrees of emphasis[3] but are common to all schools of law are: (1) The Qur'an, (2) The *Sunna,* (3) Ijma (consensus), and (4) *Qiyas* (analogy).

According to Mir Waliyallah: "The list is not exhaustive in any sense. Definitely and undeniably, there are other sources of Muslim Laws as well[4]. For example, there have been recongized al- Masalih al-Mursala (Public weal), Istihsan (juristic preference). Istishab or Istidlal (demanding continuation of company). Urf (custom), *Isra iliyyat* (the ancient laws). etc.

2. The Position of the Qur'an and *Sunna* in modernist research

Islam is a system of beliefs and laws. The beliefs or articles of faith need no explanation or amplification. The declared forms of worship *(ibada)* in the strict

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*Faculty of Islamic Studies, University of Karachi, Karachi-75270, Pakistan

27. Amir-Moezzi, The Divine Guide, 13-16

28. Tabataba'i, Shi'ite Islam, 107

29. Ibid., 109-111.

30. Imam Ali in his famous sermon Shaqshaqiah clearly responded to this question. The sermon was given to the crowd of Muslims who insisted on pledging allegiance to Ali as Amir al-mu'menin (the ruler of the faithful), after the death of Othman, the third khalifa. In that sermon Imam Ali rejected any kind of inclination toward temporal power for the sake of temporal. He announced that the task of the leadership of the society was lower to him than the "sneezing of a goat". On another occasion, he declares that the worldly power is to him as an old shoe, the pair of which is missing. (See, Nahjul Balaghah, Elmhurst, New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, Inc. 1985).

31. Amir-Moezzi, The Divine Guide, 62-63.

32. This Position is the succession of the Prophet in all aspects, excluding the receiving of the wahy or the inspiration of the Word of God, the Qur'an.

33. Kazemi Moussavi, Ahmad "The Institutionalization of Marja-i-Taqlid in the Nineteenth Century Shi,ite Community" in The Muslim World, Vol. LXXXIII, No. 3-4 July-October, 1994, 279-280.

34. Ijthad is the intellectual effort of the jurists to reach independent religious legal decisions. Mujtahid is one who exercises Ijtihad.

35. Moussavi, "The Institutionalization of Marja'-i-Taqlid in the Nineteenth century Shi'ite Community", 280.

14. Syeed Muhammad Hossein Tabataba'i, Shi'ite Islam, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975), 113.

15. "Ana madinat al-ilm wa Ali babuha" Quoted in Amir-Moezzi, The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism, (Albany: State university of New York Press, 1994), 190 n. 340.

16. Nasr, Knowledge, 1-5.

17. Within Shi'a thought, the revealed truth has an exoteric and esoteric aspect. The exoteric side is manifested through lawgiving prophecy, that is the revelation of the Sacred Book, tanzil, through the Prophet Muhammad. The other is the esoteric aspect the presentation of the only true interparation of the Holy Book, ta'wil. This is revealed through the mission of the Imams (Amir-Moezzi, The Divine Guide, 29).

18. Despite the complexity of the term walaya in the technical terminology of Sufism, its meaning in early Shi'ism is quite simple. It is one of the key words of the shi'a tradition, having a double meaning. Taken from the root wly, it means love and fidelity. The term used for the Imam, Wali, on the one hand, means the friends of God and His prophet. On the other hand, in relationship with his followers, wali is the "master" or "ruler". Applied to the followers, walaya implies one's unfailing love and submission towards the imam as a holy guide. (Amir-Moezzi, The Divine Guide, 25,29,34 139).

19. Not cited in the standard works of the hadith, but supported with Qur'anic verses.

20. The word 'aql is often translated as reason, intellect, or science. The significance of the notion of 'aql in Shi'ism is due to he fact that it is one of the main aspects of the Shi'ism is due to the fact that it is one of the main aspects of the shi'a dogma.

    Etymologically, the word means "to bind". It was used to signify the leash that was tied to an animal's feet to restrain it. After the advent of Islam the word found a special importance, which implied more than a simple reference to a faculty within human beings that restrains them from foolishness. It is rather an inner faculty transcendent knowledge, a kind of perception of the divine, which brings one to submission to divine authority. (Amir-Moezzi, The divine Guide, 6-7).

21. Al-Kulayni, Usul min al-kafi, (Tehran: Eslamiyye, 1344/1966), Vol. 1, 23-24.

22. Amini, Al-Ghadir fil-kitab wal-Sunna wal-adab, (Tehran, 1330/1952), Vol. 10. 359.

23. Amir-moezzi, The Divine Guide, 9.

24. Ibid., quoted here, 176, no. 247.

25. Ibid., 52.

26. The Prophet said: "The Qur'an has an inner dimension, and that inner dimension has an inner dimension up to seven inner dimensions". Quoted in Tabataba'i, Shi'ite Islam, 96-119, no. 18.

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as well as the teaching role. While infallibility is exclusive to the fourteen ma'soumin, according to the shi's, there is no consensus among the ulama as to whether the continuance of the functions of the Imam in the contemporary Shi'a communities should comprise of the distinctive three-fold role, or that was to be undertaken only by the infallible Twelve Imams.

Endnotes

1. Sachiko Murata, The Tao of Islam (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 15.
2. The word exoteric refers to aspects of the tradition which are suitable for communication to the general public, as opposed to esoteric which pertains to aspects reserved for the inner or select circle of disciples. The first is basically concerned with that aspect of the revealed message which governs the totality of the life of the ordinary members of the tradition, while the second is specifically concerned with the sapiential needs of those who pursue Ultimate Reality in an extraordinary manner. The division between the realm of exoteric and esoteric can be better understood in the context of the Sufi terminology, where the exoteric aspect is identified with Shari'a and the esoteric with Tariqah. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Knoweldge and the Sacred, (Pakistan: Suhail Academy Lahore, 1988), 76.
3. The translation of the Qur'an used in the present work is that of M. M. Pickthall, (New Delhi: Universal Bookstall, 1988).
4. The word vicegerent is often used in Islamic texts as an English equivalent of the phrase Khalifat Allah, the vicegerent of God, who is appointed by the Sovereign and Supreme chief as a deputy in order to rule over the created world. While the twelve Imams are the vicegerent of God par excellent by their virtue of inerrency, the function of vicegerency is also incumbent on all of humanity.
5. Murata, The Tao of Islam, 17.
6. Ibid, 15.
7. Quoted in The Tao of Islam, 39, 40, 95, 234. This hadith is often quoted by the Sufis, However it is not cited in the Hadith collections.
8. Ibid, ch. 2.
9. Nasr, Knowledge, 182.
10. From the Shahnameh (Tehran: Sherkate Sahamiye Ketabhaye Jibi, 1363/1974), vol. 1, 76-77. The English translation is quoted in Murata, The Tao of Islam, 136.
11. From Golestan-i-Sa'di, quoted in S.H. Nasr, Knowledge and the Sacred, 182.
12. Murata, 44.
13. Nasr, Ideals, 161.

successor of the Prophet in his in initiary knowledge, he is the one who leads the way to God. The journey to the divine entails a process, the beginning of which is the Shari'a. Because the Imam is closest to the Prophet himself in the knowledge of the shari'a the Imam is deemed the most appropriate person to lead the community.

On the part of the community, there is a need for a guide in the undertaking as well as in the enforcement of the Shari'a. Since the Imam comprises both the interior and the exterior knowledge of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, it is most fitting that he executes the position of leadership in the community. Even the historical fact about the quality of the engagement of the Imams in political activity becomes irrelevant or at most of little value. To say that the imams were not involved in politics at all (as in the case of the first, the second and the eighth Imam), does not modify the fact that the Imam also directing the society towards its well-being. At times throughout the history of early Shi'a and in fact as early as the period of the leadership of the first Imam, the urbanization of the community caused difficulties in terms of undertakings political power.[31] It appears that the political-religious model that the Prophet had presented was outmoded. This very factor, along with the complications of the leadership of the urbanized society, made the undertaking of such a task impossible for the Imams. Based on the above premise and also the deprivation of the Imams from their rightful position,[32] it is not surprising that the last Imam the Mahdi, is hidden. His occultation or seclusion, it is believed, early in his life and will continue as long as God wills. It is his triumphal return at the end of time that the Shi'as await. His return, it is believed, will bring about militant combat against oppressors and, thereby, eliminate evil and injustice from the world.

Conclusion

This reflection explores the three-fold role of the Imam from specifically the Twelver shi'a tradition. It is the Imam as spiritual guide, as teacher of Islamic sciences and injunctions and as political ruler that distinguishes the Imam from other religious teachers. While the three distinctive roles are specific characteristics of the Twelve Imams, shi'a thought maintains that in the absence of the infallible Imam (Imam-i-Ma'sum), one is to refer to the 'ulama (the larnded in Islamic sciences). The notion of the 'ulama in the tradition of the Shi's was founded in the fourth/tenth century by the emergence of the tradition-reporters. In fact there are indications that the Imams themselves referred their followers to the shi'a tradition-reporters in cases of inaccessibility of an Imam.[33] This is the basis for the legitimacy of the 'ulama and of the notion of Ijtihad[34] which became institutionalized in 1262/1846.[35] However, the fact that a Mujtahid or Marjia' is the supreme exemplar for the Shi'a community has led to a series of debates among present-day Shi'as. The question concerns the legitimacy of the present-day 'ulama in undertaking the political functions in the Shi'a community

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thought and who acquainted their students with it[29] In an similar vein, a large number of scholars, Shi'a and Sunni alike, gathered around the sixth Imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq, to obtain knowledge of the law and jurisprudence of Islam. Among these were eminent figures such as Abu Hannifah, the founder of one of the four Sunni schools of law . The significance of Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq in the compilation and formation of the Islamic law; in fact Twelver Shi'ism is also known as the Ja'fari School.

The Political Role of the Imam

Different tendencies exist in regard to the multifaceted role of the Imam in Shi'a Islam. Some have reduced this role to merly the theological and political aspects. Other attempts have been made to limit this role to the theological and spiritual functions. Despite these partial views, the mission of the Twelver Shi'a Imam in continuation of the Prophet's own mission, is to undertake all three dimensions of leadership of the Shi'a community. Hence, the Imam is the teacher of Islamic sciences, the ruler of the Muslim community, as well as the spiritual guide for the faithful. The goal of the first and the second function is accorded with the third. That is to say, all three dimensions, despite their differences, are ways of attaining the higher levels of knowledge of God. Therefore, all three dimensions are essential and none can be dismissed altogether even if they may appear to have a this-worldly character.

The principal role of the Imam is that which corresponds to the spiritual realm and the vision of the beyond. This is not, however, in contradiction to the relevant worldly function in the political leadership of society. To clarify this issue further, it is important to point out that within Islamic thought there is no distinction made between the temporal and the spiritual. Since all that exists has come into being by God's very command, all is considered sacred. To emphasize the point further, Islamic vocabulary does not contain a term which could parallel the English word profane. Hence, those who argue against the necessity of the political leadership of the Imam within the Muslim community fail to discern both the ultimate goal of such leadership and the fact that all is sacred. Based on the above premise, the Imams' Political leadership cannot be viewed as an inclination towards temporal power. On the contrary, it should in fact be looked upon as a reflection of God's sovereignty over the earth.

However, confusion arises with regard to whether the Imam should be linked to temporal power. The way out of this ambiguity depends on various factors. If one asks whether the Imam should be holding temporal powers or not, the response is certainly in the affirmative. If one asks whether the Imam is inclined toward temporal power or not the response would necessarily be in the negative. There are various indications in the sayings of the Imam particularly the first Imam, which clearly reject any desire on the part of the Imams rather it was a duty. Since the Imam is regarded as the perfect man (al-insan al-kamel) and the

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by the eyes of the heart. The vision of the heart refers to a kind of unity between 'aql and the heart to form a hiero-intelligance which appears to be at the very center of one's being. In this regard, a Prophet's Hadith reported by the first Imam reads: "Hiero-intelligence in the heart is like a lamp in the center of the house".[24]

The concept of unifying mind and heart, which is one of the practices of Islamic spirituality, was initiated in the early teachings of the Imams. Only later was it adopted by various Sufi orders whereby the vision with the heart was made a fundamental practice of their teachings.[25]

Imam as Teacher of Islamic Sciences and Injunctions

The second role of the Imam in Twelver Shi'ism is that which corresponds to the formal aspect of religion that is, teaching the exterior meaning of the Qur'an and the Hadith. While the meaning of the Qur'an is not limited to the exterior level, the commands in matters of doctrine and action have been elucidated mainly at that level. Nevertheless, the sayings of the Prophet and the Imams clearly indicate that in addition to the exterior, the Qur'an has a profound interior aspect. The interior dimension is often known to be seven-fold[26]. Moreover, the interior does not eradicate or invalidate the exterior meaning of the teachings of the Book. In fact, most of the religious injunctions of the Muslim society are drawn by the Imam from the exterior aspect of the Qur'an and the Hadith while this is true, it does not imply that the exoteric teachings of the Imams are exhausted with the exterior meaning. In order to explicate ilm al-Tawhid (knowledge of unity), the necessity of prophecy and the resurrection of the dead, the Imams were compelled to make use of rational thought beyond the use of their vision of the heart.[27] Although, as was mentioned previously, the kernel or inner meaning of Islam according to Shi'a was placed in the unique vision of the heart, nevertheless, intellectual and rational thought was not prohibited. In fact, the Imams take their initiative for engaging in intellectual reasoning from the text of the Qur'an:

> Call unto the way of the Lord with wisdom and fair exhortation,
> and reason with them in a better way (Qur'an 16:125).

In fact, within the field of theology (kalam), as well as in the esoteric realm of knowledge, the students of the school of Imams were among the foremost masters of theology.[28] Moreover, the chain of theologians, not only of Shi'a but the Sunnis as well, goes back to Imam Ali. His The Peak of Eloquence (Nahj al-balagha) entails metaphysical reasoning and some of the most profound philosophical thoughts. In fact the only examples of free philosophical and intellectual discussions among the scholars of the Arab world of first and second century Islam belong to the sayings of the Shi'ite Imams. It was the Imams, particularly the first and the eighth, who initiated a form of philosophical

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who knows his own soul, knows his Lord"[19] The highest knowledge, therefore is that of knowing one's self. As an extension of this knowledge one can also attain the knowledge of the cosmos as well as the knowledge of God. This is why the Qur'an repeatedly instructs human beings to look into their souls as well as into the created world in order to obtain a better understanding of the Creator. In a similar vein the books of the hadith make various allusions to the notion of 'aql,[20] which is translated as sacred or hiero-intelligence. It is therefore not surprising that hiero-intelligence is regarded as the first of all spiritual entities to be created. In this regard the sixth Imam, Ja'far al-Sadaq said:

> "God-may he be glorified and exalted -- created 'aql first among
> the spiritual entities; He drew it forth from the right of His throne
> and made it proceed from His own light. Then He commanded it
> to advance, it advanced; then God proclaimed: "I created you
> glorious, and I gave you pre-eminence over all my creatures"[21]

Hiero-intelligence is, therefore, looked upon as a gift bestowed by God to human beings. It is a gift which provides an interior vision so that the apprehension of the divine is rendered possible. It is with the use of 'aql that one can come to know one's self and eventually also come to know one's Lord with the aim of finally coming in submission to the Lord. Herein lies the Parallel between 'aql and the Imam. What 'aql is to the human person, the Imam is to the human society. As the 'aql is instrumental for a person's knowledge of the self and of God, the Imam is instrumental for the society's knowledge of itself and of God. Hence, both 'aql and the Imam are equally essential in one's quest for perfection In this regard, it is fiting to qoute but one of the Prophet's Hadith in which the significance of the knowledge of the Imam is betrayed: "Who-so-ever dies, not knowing the Imam of his time, has died in the state of ignorance"[22]

It is apparent that the necessity of the knowledge of one's own soul is placed in juxtaposition with the knowledge of the Imam of the time. This results from the fact that the Imam is not only the universal man and the manifestation of the divine names, but he is also the spiritual guide of the lives and actions of people .

Another way of expressing this is to look at the Islamic tradition as where God bestows two means of guidance to the human being: the first is heiro-intelligence, that is the interior proof, and the second is God's messengers, the prophets and the Imams (for those who subscribe to the Shi'a thought), that which constitutes the exterior proof.[23] It can also be delineated that the role of Imam within the macrocosm is parallel to that of the role of 'aql within the microcosm. It is assumed that 'aql's principal meaning is conveyed in its esoteric aspect, which is the means of the interior vision of the divine. In a similar vein, the ultimate role of the Imam is to reveal the esoteric truths throughout the realities of faith. They guide their followers on a path that leads to the vision of the heart, a vision of that which cannot be seen by the eyes of the head but only

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