Intellectual Aspects of the Imam Reza 's Life

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Basic Beliefs

Islam is the religion which preaches tawhid, the Unity of God. Tawhid, then, is the starting point from which a Muslim sets out to build his creed deep inside his inner self; otherwise, he cannot be called a Muslim, nor can the light of faith shine in his soul. The sound definition of tawhid is what has been endorsed by the Ahl al-Bayt (A.S.) through their teachings and statements; anything other than that is but falsification and adulteration and insinuations which may have been necessitated by erroneous philosophical ideologies the inventors of which tried to reach the furthermost depth of the essence of the Divine, but the results they reached caused them to deviate from reaching even the beginning of belief, so they indulged themselves into the labyrinths of atheism and loss.

In researching such an extremely complex issue, we have to follow into the footsteps of the Ahl al-Bayt (A.S.). If we accept them as our guides, we shall have no fear about falling into destruction or departing from the Straight Path according to what is already reported about the Prophet (S.A.W.) who said: "My Ahl al-Bayt (A.S.) among you are like the ark of Noah: whoever boards it is saved, and whoever lags behind it is drowned and ruined."

Imam al-Rida (A.S.) did not have a system of his own regarding the philosophy of tawhid; rather, his was the very same pristine system about which all Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (A.S.) unanimously agreed and to whose safeguarding they dedicated their lives in the face of all other sects which may have deviated from the achievement of the noble objective.

We are not going here to make a comparison between these sects in as far as the belief in tawhid is concerned, for this may require a very lengthy research whose discussion will require us to go beyond the limits we have set for our study here; rather, what is important for us here is to present the limits of the concept of tawhid from the stories we have already narrated .(.about Imam al-Rida (A.S

Misconception of the Similitude of God to His Creation

The first to come across in researching the hadith narrated by Imam al-Rida (A.S.) in the subject of tawhid is this one: "Anyone who makes a similitude of God with His creation is a mushrik (polytheist), and anyone who attributes to Him what He has prohibited is kafir (disbeliever)" which is, as reported about the Prophet (S.A.W.), a clear answer to those who

claim that "God created Adam in His Own Image.

"In another text, the Imam (A.S.) explains to us the misconception in whose pitfall others have fallen; al-Husayn ibn Khalid reported saying, "I said to al-Rida (A.S.), `O son of the Messenger of God! People say that the Messenger of God (S.A.W.) said that the Almighty and Exalted God created Adam in His Own image.

' He said, `May God fight them! They distorted the beginning of this hadith. The Messenger of God (S.A.W.) passed by two men exchanging insults and abusive language, and he heard one of them saying to the other, `God made your face ugly and ugly is anyone who is like you,' whereupon he (S.A.W.) said, `O servant of God! Do not say so to your brother, for the Almighty and Exalted God created Adam's image like his."

The Messenger (S.A.W.) here is forbidding the man from articulating such an abusive language which abuses Adam, father of all men. The pronoun in the original text (i.e., "image like his") belongs to the man being abused, not to God; therefore, it is erroneous to say that the meaning here is that God created Adam in His Own Image. The Imam emphasizes this by narrating one qudsi hadith in which the Almighty tells the Messenger of God (S.A.W.), "The one who makes a similitude of Myself to My creation is indeed ignorant of Who I am."

The hadith regarding the Divine is entangled and complex, but if you read it in the hadith narrated by the Ahl al-Bayt (A.S.), you will find it in full harmony with the human nature, lucidly interpreting the obscure concept in brief expressions with a full vision despite their inclusion of .a spacious philosophical context

God's Attributes are His Own Essence

While researching the hadith of Imam al-Rida (A.S.) in this regard, we come across his treatment of the issue of His Attributes which are none other than a description of His Own Essence, and that it is impossible that they should be anything else. For example, al-Husayn ibn Khalid said, "I heard al-Rida (A.S.) saying, "God has always been Knowing, omni-Potent, Living, Eternal, Hearing, Seeing,' so I said to him, 'O son of the Messenger of God (S.A.W.)! People have been saying that God knows through His faculty of knowledge, omni-Potent through His faculty of power, Eternal through His ability to withstand time, Hearing through His faculty of hearing, and Seeing through His faculty of vision.' He (A.S.) said, 'Anyone who says so and believes in it has indeed accepted other gods besides God, and he has nothing to do with our religion.' Then he added, 'God has always been Knowing, omni-Potent, Eternal, Hearing, and Seeing in His Own Essence; Exalted is God above the claims of the polytheists and those who make such similitudes a great deal of exaltation."

Knowledge, might, and other attributes of God are not actually different from His Essence;

rather, they are the same like the Essence in their existence and reality; otherwise, they would have been partners with God in His eternity which contradicts the very concept of tawhid which agrees with the nature of His being, that is, the eternity of the Self on its own, without having .anything else as partner therewith

Belief in Plurality of the Essence and Attributes is Shirk

In another hadith reported by Muhammad ibn Arafa, the Imam (A.S.) explains to us how one will be committing shirk if he considers the Essence of the Almighty and His Attributes as separate from each other. Muhammad said, "I asked al-Rida (A.S.), 'Did God create things by some sort of power or not?' He answered, 'It is not possible that He must have used some sort of power to do so because if you say that He created things by a power, you would be saying that you imagined a tool whereby He created things, which is shirk.

And if you say that He created things which He subjected to His power, you would be saying that He made sure He would be able to overpower them, while He is not weak or incapable or in need of anyone else; rather, He, Glory be to Him, is Almighty due to the fact that His own ".Essence is Mighty

The Difference Between God's Will and People's

In another part of the discussion, the Imam (A.S.) tells us about the difference between the Will of God and the will of humans. Safwan ibn Yahya said, "I asked Abul-Hassan (A.S.), `Tell me about God's Will and the will of His creation.' He said, `The will of a person is something he possesses, hence it is a possessive pronoun; as regarding God, His Will is His Action, nothing other than that, because He does not contemplate upon doing something, nor does He decide to do something, nor does he sets His mind to do something,

and all these verbs have nothing to do with His Essence; they are among the faculties of humans, and they are among the characteristics of the creation. God's Will is His Action, nothing other than that. He says `Be!' and it is without articulating something, or using a tongue, or sets his mind upon something or contemplates upon doing something, nor does He think about the means to do so, nor does He think about how."

The previous chapter contained a discussion of the issue of eternity of God's Will in a debate between the Imam (A.S.) and Sulayman al-Maroozi, the Khurasani scientist of kalam who was .invited by al-Mamoon to debate the Imam

Queries

There may be some innocent questions which come to the mind of anyone which the Imam

may have tried to answer in a very simple way relying on clear Qur'anic verses whereby we may pass without being aware of their precise meaning and the depth of their context. For example, regarding the Knowledge of God, he was asked by al-Husayn ibn Bashshar, "Does God know about the thing which never was how it would look like when it is?" He answered,

"God Almighty knows of things before their existence; He has said: `We were wont to write down all that ye did,'162 and He said to the inmates of Hell, `If they were returned (back to earth), they would certainly relapse to the things they were forbidden, for they are indeed liars.'163 The Exalted and the Almighty God knows that if those inmates were to be returned to earth, they would go back to their old ways and commit what they were prohibited from committing. When the angels said, `Wilt Thou place therein one who makes mischief therein and shed blood while we celebrate Thy praises and glorify Thy holy Name?' He said, `I know what ye know not.'164 So God always knows since eternity about things before He creates them."

We may find in some Qur'anic verses that God is describing Himself with attributes which do not fit His Exalted Status such as mocking and ridiculing as in the verse, "God will throw back their mockery on them"165 and "God will throw back their ridicule on them"166 and "(the unbelievers) plotted and schemed, and God too plotted"167 and "They strive to deceive God while He is deceiving them."168 But the Imam (A.S.) answers by saying that God Almighty does not ridicule, mock, cheat, or anything like that,

but He rewards those who commit these sins with the reward they deserve for their ridicule, mockery, cheating, etc. The Imam's answer is derived from the meaning of the Qur'anic verse which states, "The plotting of evil will hem only the author thereof."169 When these individuals ridicule, mock, plot, or cheat,

they do not sense the destined consequences for such a behaviour when the tables are turned and they have to suffer perpetual pain and torture. This is proven by the verses, "They plotted and planned, but We too planned, even while they perceived it not. Then see what the end of their plot was! We destroyed them and their people, all of them."170

There are Qur'anic verses which deserve a serious look into them when their superficial meaning gives the impression that they invite one to uphold what must not Islamically be upheld, departing from the concept of the Divine Perfection. For example, the Almighty has said, "They have forgotten God, so He has forgotten them,"171 and "We shall that day forget them as they forgot the meeting of this day of theirs."172 To attribute forgetfulness to God is erroneous because it is an attribute of His creation; besides, such a superficial meaning contradicts another verse which says, "... and thy Lord never forgets."

"173 But the Imam interprets "forgetfulness" in these texts to mean abandonment, and that God abandons them by not allocating for them the rewards He allocates to those who yearn for such meeting. Since they forgot about God and did not do good deeds prior to such meeting, God will make His good rewards distant from them and will reward them with torture and eternal Hellfire.

What is meant by "forgetfulness" in these texts is not overlooking or bypassing, nor does the meaning of abandonment is negligence. The Imam pointed this out when he answered someone who asked him about the meaning of the verse "... and God left them in utter darkness so they could not see"174 by saying, "God, the Sublime and Praised One, cannot be described as abandoning as can His creation, but when He knows that they would never leave disbelief and straying, He would stop His support for them and His kindness, leaving them to ".have their own way

Seeing God

The discussion of "seeing" God is one of the subjects of the science of kalam in which views of Islamic schools of thought differed since the battle and argument on kalam started, shattering the unity of the Creed's interpretation of many doctrinal bases upon which the structure of the Islamic Message was established. The Ahl al-Bayt (A.S.) took a stance towards the subject of "seeing" God which was in harmony with the pristine concept of tawhid as Islam intends it to be, regarding Him above being physically seen simply because that would be possible only for an object of limited dimensions.

As regarding the verses which give the impression that "seeing" God is possible, such as "Some faces on that Day shall be bright, looking towards their Lord,"175 and "Verily, from (the Light of) their Lord, that Day, will they be veiled,"176 and "Thy Lord comes, and His angels, rank upon rank,"177 as well as other such verses, Imam al-Rida (A.S.) interpreted them in a way which kept them in the context in which they were revealed. For example,

the meaning of "... looking to their Lord" is that they were bright with hope and anticipation waiting to be awarded with their Lord's rewards, that is, anticipating His generosity and prizes. The meaning of the second verse is that they are veiled from receiving the rewards of their Lord, for God Almighty cannot be said to occupy a physical space, a place, in which He would settle, veiling Himself from His servants. In the third verse, what is coming is God's Decree, that is, your Lord's Decree is coming to pass; otherwise, God Almighty cannot be said to come and go, for these movements are characteristic of His creatures, and it is impossible that He should have their attributes, for this would mean that there would be a place where He is not there! God is highly elevated above this degradation.

Thus are the Qur'anic verses interpreted according to the occasion upon which they were revealed. Moreover, such an interpretation which takes into consideration both context and occasion (or reason for revelation) does not depart even a little bit from the particular appearance of such verses simply because such an understood appearance is not derived from the verbal text alone; rather, other aspects which encompass the subject's angles, and for whose explanation the text was revealed, have also to be taken into consideration

Compulsion and Empowerment

While researching the way Imam al-Rida (A.S.) employed to explain the subject and relevant topics related to the unity of God, we are faced by others with many questions inquiring about the theory of compulsion and empowerment which occupied the minds of Muslims for a long period of time and caused a great deal of more division among them due to the debates among the scholars of the science of kalam of various sects at that time. Some endorsed compulsion, others endorsed empowerment, while still others preached taking an in-between approach

The Approach Adopted by Ahl al-Bayt

The school of thought preached by Ahl al-Bayt (A.S.) regards the latter concept as the basis of Divine Justice whereby God rewards good doers for their good deeds and punishes the evil doers for their evil. Compulsion is akin to oppression and is a negation of justice, while empowerment is a postponement of effecting justice, disabling it from getting the upper-hand and the power it rightfully deserves. Both contradict the concept of the absolute perfection of the Divine.

A man visited Imam al-Rida (A.S.) and asked him, "O son of the Messenger of God (S.A.W.)! It has been reported to us that the truthful (al-Sadiq) Ja'fer ibn Muhammad (A.S.) said, `There is neither compulsion nor empowerment but a way to choose one of two.' What does he exactly mean?" He answered, "Whoever claims that God does our deeds and then penalizes us for doing them has in fact accepted the concept of compulsion, and whoever claims that God Almighty empowers His Proofs to distribute His sustenance has in fact adopts the belief of empowerment.

One who believes in compulsion is a kafir (disbeliever), and one who believes in empowerment is a mushrik (polytheist)." So I asked him, 'O son of the Messenger of God! Then what is this way to choose one of two means?' He answered, 'It is finding a way to do what they are enjoined to do and forsake what they are enjoined to forsake.

' I asked him, `Does God Almighty have a Way and a Will in this regard?' He said, `As regarding

deeds done in obedience to His commandments, His Will in their regard is His approval of and assistance in their performance. As regarding His Will about sins, it is His order that they ".should be shunned, that He condemns them, and that He forsakes those who commit them

Empowerment

Yasir the servant said, "I asked al-Rida (A.S.), `What do you say about empowerment?' He said, `God Almighty entrusted His Creed to His Prophets to convey to people, saying, `Whatever the Messenger permitted for you, take it with approval, and whatever he ordered you not to do, do not do it.

' As regarding creation and sustenance; no, He did not empower anyone in their regard.' Then he said, `God Almighty says: `God is the Creator of all things,'178 and He also says, `It is God Who has created you: further, He has provided for your sustenance; then He will cause you to die; and again He will give you life. Are there any of your (false) partners who can do any single one of these things? Glory to Him! And High is He above the partners they attribute (to Him)!"179

Imam Warns

In another narrative, the Imam discloses for us the conduct which a believer has to undertake with those who believe in empowerment in order to create a psychological barrier between them and others which would paralyze their action and deprive them of the element whereby they influence others by the misleading and false creed they preach. Abu Hashim al-Ja'feri says: "I asked Abul-Hassan (A.S.) about the ghulat and about those who believed in empowerment, and he said, 'The ghulat are kafirs (disbelievers), while those who believe in empowerment are mushriks (polytheists).

Those who sit with them, mix with them, eat or drink with them, visit them, marry their daughters to them or marry their daughters, accept their trusts or entrust them to keep theirs, believe in them, support them even by a fraction of a word, have abandoned the nearness to God, to the Messenger of God, and to us Ahl al-Bayt (A.S.)."

In another narrative, when someone mentioned compulsion and empowerment, the Imam (A.S.) said to the attendants, "Shall I provide you with an original view in which you shall not dispute with each other, and through which you will win the argument over those who argued with you in its regard?' We requested him to do so, whereupon he said, 'God Almighty was not obeyed by compulsion, nor was He disobeyed by being over-powered. He did not neglect His servants living in His domain; He is the King above their kings, the Powerful One above those who have power among them.

When His servants opt to obey Him, He would not stop them nor forbid them, and if they opt to disobey Him, He may interfere and foil their attempt, or He may not and they will do just that; therefore, He is not the One who caused them to disobey Him.' Then he said, `Anyone who ".masters this will have the winning argument over his opponent

Imams Did Not Endorse Making Similitudes With God

Imam al-Rida (A.S.), in a dialogue with al-Husayn ibn Khalid, denied what some people attributed to his forefathers when they claimed that they made similitudes to God and believed in compulsion, describing those people as ghulat who underestimated the Greatness of God Almighty, and that their fabrication about his forefathers and their attributing to them what they did not say was similar to the fabrication of others about the Messenger of God (S.A.W.) by their narration of allegations endorsing making such similitudes and also endorsing compulsion.

Regarding the subject of tawhid and its relevant topics, Imam al-Rida (A.S.) has a long discussion which requires an independent and sufficient research, and suffices us this brief presentation of what was reported about him in this regard. Those who wish to pursue their research of this subject are referred to 'Uyoon Akhbar al-Rida (A.S.) by Shaikh al-Saduq in .which he compiled what was narrated about the Imam in this regard

Transmigration of Souls

Al-Tanasukh kufr, that is, "To believe in the transmigration of the souls is to disbelieve in God," says the Imam in an answer to the question "What is your view regarding the transmigration of the souls?" put to him by someone. He answered saying, "Anyone who believes in tanasukh is kafir (disbeliever) in God the Great, a disbeliever in Heavens and in Hell.

"The reason for this is that the belief in the transmigration of the souls means that the human soul, after its departure from the body at the time of death, goes to the body of an animal to live in it. In other words, it is like a bird that as soon as it is set free from its cage will seek another cage. This implies a negation of the Judgement which is one of the basic principles of the Islamic creed, hence it is a negation of Paradise and Hell.

Those who believe in the transmigration of the souls interpret Paradise and Hell by saying that if the soul that was set free from the body settles inside a good animal, then it is Paradise, and if it settles inside a bad animal, then it is Hell, which is nothing but a hallucination which the Holy Qur'an clearly refutes, for both Paradise and Hell are realities rather than symbols as .these persons would like to think

Imamate

Imamate is one of the basic beliefs (usool) which was the starting point for all the deep differences since the early period of Islam and immediately after the demise of the Prophet (S.A.W.). The Muslim ummah, therefore, split into contradictory and contrasting sects due to the deepening of the gaps either due to the actions of the ruling authorities, or to personal ambitions aspired by some of those who coveted to be Imams.

There are two major schools of thought in Islam which are regarded as the stems from which those sects branch. They are the Sunni school of thought, which preaches that Imamate after the Prophet (S.A.W.) was the right of Abu Bakr then to the three caliphs who succeeded him, and the Imami Shi'a school of thought which preaches that Imamate after the Prophet (S.A.W.) was the right of Ali ibn Abu Talib (A.S.) and to his eleven descendants after him.

Each of these schools has its own arguments regarding proving its authenticity and the lack thereof of the other.

The Ahl al-Bayt (A.S.) derive their arguments from clear and obvious statement in their regard said by the Prophet (S.A.W.) and also due to their merits and qualifications which raised them above both common and elite individuals. Imam al-Rida (A.S.) explained to us the actual program to identify an Imam which agrees with the human nature in considering the distinctive merits and the sufficient qualifications present in a person to qualify for such a very important status.

Imam's Qualifications

In defining the qualifications of the Imam, Imam al-Rida (A.S.) tells us that he has to be the most knowledgeable among people, the most wise, the most pious, the most courageous, the most generous, and the best in worshipping God. These qualifications have to be present in the imam since he is the one charged with safeguarding the Islamic Message after the Prophet .(S.A.W.) and the one who clarifies its precise details and hidden meanings to people

Selection of the Imam is Done by God

The Imam (A.S.) assured the person who inquired about these qualifications that the nation cannot be left to choose its imam without statements in this regard made by the Prophet (S.A.W.) who in turn conveys God's commandments related to this issue, for nobody other than God knows the secrets of the individuals and what they hide inside their hearts.

The Imam (A.S.) said: "Do they really realize the significance of Imamate so that they permit themselves to make a choice in its regard? Imamate is greater in prestige, more significant, higher in status, more difficult to attain, harder to achieve, than can people conceive in their

minds or define according to their views, or select an Imam as they please, for Imamate became the sole prerogative of Prophet Ibrahim (A.S.), the Friend of God, second in significance only to Prophethood, whereby He honoured him, saying, 'He (God) said, 'I will make thee an Imam to the nations.' He pleaded:

'And also (Imams) from my offspring?!' He answered: 'But My Promise is not within the reach of evil-doers.'180 This verse, therefore, has nullified the imamate of any oppressor till the Day of Resurrection and became the prerogative solely of those elite persons. God, thus, honoured Ibrahim (Abraham) by allotting Imamate to those of his progeny who are the elite and who are the Purified, saying, 'And We bestowed upon him Isaac and, as an additional boon, (a grandson), Jacob, and We made righteous men of everyone (of them).

And We made them Imams guiding (men) by Our Command.'181 Imamate, then remained among the descendants of Ibrahim (A.S.), son inherited it from father, one century after another, till the Prophet (S.A.W.) inherited it. It was then when the Almighty God said to him, 'Without doubt, among men, the nearest of kin to Abraham are those who follow him as are also this Prophet and those who believe,

and God is the Protector of those who have faith.'182 Thus, Imamate became the right of the Prophet (S.A.W.) who, according to the commands of the Almighty God, and in the manner He deemed, vested it upon Ali (A.S.) and it settled among the elite of his descendants whom God gifted with the gift of knowledge and true belief."

The Imam (A.S.) continues to say: "Imamate is the status of the Prophets, the legacy of the wasis (successors of Prophets); Imamate is the caliphate of God Almighty and of His Messenger (S.A.W.)."

"The caliphate of God Almighty" has to be the prerogative of the best of people after the Prophet (S.A.W.) simply because he, the successor of the Prophet (S.A.W.), is God's caliph on earth after the demise of the Prophet (S.A.W.). His selection, therefore, has to be done by God for how can anyone judge anyone else to be eligible for it if he does not know that person's true inner self? We simply do not understand at all the wisdom of leaving the selection of the Imam ...to the nation without a final judgement in this regard coming from the Almighty

An Imam's Attributes

Having defined the attributes an Imam has to have which represent his day-to-day conduct needed by people, Imam al-Rida (A.S.) says: "An Imam is a scholar who is not ignorant, someone who looks after others untiringly, the substance of sanctity and purity, asceticism and renunciation of the world, of knowledge and adoration.

His knowledge grows, his clemency is perfect; he is aware of the responsibilities of Imamate,

knowledgeable regarding politics, commanding obedience, executing the Commandments of God, advising the servants of God, protecting the creed of God. Prophets and Imams are assisted by God Who bestows upon them from the treasures of His knowledge and sovereignty in a way He does not endow anyone else, making their knowledge superior to that of anyone contemporary to them, for He, the Exalted and the Sublime, has said, regarding Talut (Samuel), 'God has chosen him above you and has gifted him abundantly with knowledge and bodily prowess; God grants His authority to whomsoever He pleases. God cares for all, and He knows all things.'183 Regarding the Imams from the Household, progeny and elite descendants of His Prophet (S.A.W.), the Ahl al-Bayt (A.S.), the Dear and Sublime One has said,

`Or do they envy mankind for what God has given them of His bounty? But We had already given the people of Abraham the Book and Wisdom and conferred upon them a great kingdom,'184 and when God selects one of His servants to deal with the servants of God, He broadens his heart for such responsibility, depositing in it springs of wisdom, inspiring ".knowledge to him

Indications of Imamate

As regarding how an Imam can be identified, and what the indications are, this is explained by Imam al-Rida (A.S.) in his answer to the question someone put to him which was: "By what indication can Imamate be regarded authentic for one who claims it to himself?" He said: "By text and evidence.

"The man asked: "What is the characteristic of an Imam?" He answered: "Knowledge, and God's answer to his plea." The man asked, "By what can you yourselves prove your Imamate?" He answered: "By a Promise made to us by the Messenger of God (S.A.W.)." The man asked: "What is the evidence that you can tell what is on the mind of people?" He answered: "Have you not come to know that the Messenger (S.A.W.) said, `Beware of the discretion of a mumin for he looks through the light of God'?" The man answered in the affirmative, so the Imam (A.S.) continued saying,

"Every believer has a share of discretion, looking through the light of God according to the amount of his belief and the extent of his foresight and knowledge. God has combined in us what He has distributed to all the believers combined and said in His Book, `Behold! In this are signs for those who by tokens do understand.'185 The first of these mutawassimeen is the Messenger of God (S.A.W.), then the Commander of the Faithful (A.S.) after him, then al-Hassan then al-Husayn, then the Imams from among the descendants of al-Husayn till the

Day of Judgement."

By all of these statements does Imam al-Rida (A.S.) define for us the qualifications of an

Imam and the group that chooses him in statements which agree with the human nature and .the balances of reason which are the final judge on such issues

Notes:

162 Al Jathiya:29

163 Al An'aam:28

164 Al Bagara:30

165 Al Baqara:15

166 Al Tawba:79

167 Aali 'Imran:54

168 Al Nisaa:142

169 Fatir:43

170 Al Naml:50-51

171 Al Tawba:67

172 Al A'raaf:51

173 Maryam:64

174 Al Baqara:17

175 Al Qiyama:22-23

176 Al Mutaffifin (or Tatfif):15

177 Al Fajr:22

178 Al Zumar:62

179 Al Rum:40

180 Al Bagara:124

181 Al Anbiyaa:72-73

182 Aaali 'Imran:68

183 Al Baqara:247

184 Al Nisaa:54

185 Al Hijr:75