

Wilāyah and Ethical Excellence in Islam: An Ismā‘īlī Perspective

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Abstract

Muslims across interpretations have in common ethical values and principles stemming from the Qur’ān. The first and foremost principle is to emulate the pattern of the Prophetic character as an ideal exemplar. The Qur’ān presents the character and nature of Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) as the best. On this Qur’ānic foundation, ethical excellence is sought, ethical issues are conceptualized, and frameworks are developed by Muslim scholars and religious authorities. With this common heritage, Muslim communities, however, expounded a variety of interpretations, particularly regarding the authority to interpret and determine the best emulation of the character and nature of the Prophet. Drawing on the Qur’ān and the life of the Prophet, this research seeks to investigate Islamic ethics from the shī‘ī and specifically the Ismā‘īlī perspective. The method applied in this article is an Islamic hermeneutic known as ta’wīl, which is interpreting the apparent words of the revelation (tanzīl) and seeking their inner meanings. Through this approach, the author shows how the zāhir (exoteric) symbolizes the bāṭin (esoteric) while inextricably being linked together.

Keywords

Islamic ethics, cosmopolitan ethics, Ismailism, *wilāyah*, *ta’wīl*.

Introduction

All Muslims share the ethical principles stemming from the faith of Islam regardless of the community of interpretations they belong to and in which geographical and cultural contexts they are brought up and dwell. The Qur’ān presents Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) as the best exemplar¹ for every Muslim to draw inspiration from and aspire to emulate elements of his character. In his lifetime, the Prophet embodied the highest form of ethical principles in his teaching, behaviour, and action as encapsulated in the verse of the Qur’ān where the Prophet was sent as a mercy unto the worlds.² Drawing on the Qur’ān and the life of

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¹ Qur’ān 68:4.

² *Ibid.*, 21:107.

the Prophet, this research seeks to investigate Islamic ethics from the Shī'ī and specifically the Ismā'īlī perspective.³

Several modern Ismā'īlī studies have indicated that, until recently, Ismā'īlī religious ideas and doctrines were obscured for reasons; one of them being that after the fall of Alamut into the Mongol army in 1256 CE, they had to practice dissimulation (*taqiyyah*) to protect themselves from persecution and keep their limited literature secret.⁴ Ismā'īlī literature for a long time remained obscured to the extent that it remained inaccessible, and the community itself was thought to have been annihilated due to age-long hostility.⁵ Although several authentic classical works now have been published in critical editions and with translation, Ismā'īlī doctrinal and intellectual literature is still far from being widely studied and understood in academia.

This study will be an addition to the growing literature on the subject and an important contribution from the perspective of a scholar who not only belongs to the community but has forty years of professional affiliation with an institution of the community's religious and cultural education. This scholar has studied its literature and educated its members in doctrinal principles and living traditions. While drawing on the original Ismā'īlī sources, this research explores and contextualizes *wilāyah* (*vilāyat* in Persian), the authority, within the Shī'ī Ismā'īlī interpretation in modern studies and contemporary Ismā'īlī literature.

The approach of this study will be interpretive hermeneutic, which seeks to unveil the inner meaning through an interpretation that is hermeneutical, philosophical, symbolical, and allegorical. This is known as *ta'wīl* in the Islamic context, which is different from the *tafsīr* interpretation, which is primarily logical, philological, and historical. We will discuss the methodology in detail later. This research will draw on the works, both prose and poetry, of the leading Ismā'īlī thinkers of its classical period. Building on this foundation, the research seeks to address how the Nizārī branch of the Ismā'īlī community transforms and translates Islamic ethical values into ethical actions under the authority, *wilāyah* of the Imam of the time. In doing so, the community aspires to achieve ethical excellence in the complex contemporary world and

³ Ismailism in this article refers to the Shī'ī Imāmī Nizārī Ismā'īlī community.

⁴ Farhad Daftary, *A History of Shi'i Islam* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 136.

⁵ See Wladimir Ivanow, *My First Meeting with Ismailis of Persia* (Dar es Salaam: Umoja Press, 1966), 12.

address the emerging ethical issues that some thinkers have termed as the malaise of modernity.⁶

A Brief Overview of Islamic Ethics

The formation of Islamic ethics began with the inception of the revelation of the Qur'ān to Prophet Muḥammad. As the revelation continued and the Muslim community came into existence, ethical principles and values began to be defined by the Prophet in the light of the revelation as it continued to be revealed to him. The Prophet interpreted the revelation highlighting the moral and ethical values from the faith perspective. He translated those values and principles into concrete actions in the form of religious obligations, dispute resolutions, creation of a community (*ummah*), establishing rituals and practices, and structuring social and inter-communal relations. Thus, the genesis of Islamic ethics is rooted in the Qur'ān and the life of the Prophet as the exemplar of moral values and ethical conduct (*khuluq 'aẓīm* and *uswah ḥasanah*).⁷ With this foundation, Islamic ethics continued to evolve and develop through the course of history as Muslims encountered the literature of other religious and philosophical traditions and practices of people of different cultures, languages, religions, and historical experiences.⁸

Muslim scholars, theologians, philosophers, poets, Sufi masters, and Shī'ī imams, all have contributed to the evolution and development of Islamic ethics.⁹ In the context of the post-colonial era, the efforts continued to rejuvenate the traditional time-tested Islamic values aligning them to the needs of the modern world.¹⁰ The discourse on Islamic ethics and ethical values continues even more urgently than ever before in the complex political, technological, economic, and cultural contexts in today's globalized world.¹¹

Thus, not just Ismā'īlī Muslims are concerned about the erosion of the time-tested faith-based traditional perennial values, but also, with

⁶ Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto: Anansi Press Limited, 1999).

⁷ Qur'ān 68:4; 33:21.

⁸ Richard Walzer, "Akhlāk," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. B. Lewis, Ch. Pellat, and J. Schacht, 2nd ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), 1:325-29, at 325-26.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:325-29.

¹⁰ Basheer M. Nafi, "The Rise of Islamic Reformist Thought and Its Challenge to Traditional Islam," in *Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Suha Taji-Farauki and Basheer M. Nafi (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 40.

¹¹ See A. B. Sajoo, *Muslim Ethics, Emerging Vistas* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 26; Mohammed Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* (London: Saqi Books, 2002), 299; Taylor, *Malaise of Modernity*, 15.

the emergence of many ethical issues in the contemporary world generated by rapid changes in all aspects of human life, all faith communities, Muslim or non-Muslim, are concerned about the declining of traditional values and ethical standards in their respective communities. As other communities strive to rejuvenate and reinvigorate their value systems to meet the present and future needs of their communities, the Ismā'īlī community through institutionalization and programmatic approaches endeavours to revitalize its historical, intellectual, and spiritual traditions to strengthen its moral and ethical value system to provide an ethical framework for the global Ismā'īlī community. This framework is based on the perennial values of peace, unity, justice, equity, and most important of all respect, dignity, and quality of human life.

Wilāyah, Imam's Authority

Edward William Lane's *An Arabic-English Lexicon* defines the term *wilāyah* as a substitute for the term *walāyah* which signifies the office and authority of a *walī*, governor, or administrator.¹² Heffening, in his article on "*wilāyah*," in the *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, explains that in constitutional law *wilāyah* means "the sovereign power or the power delegated by the sovereign."¹³ The authority is derived from the verse of the Qur'ān: "O ye who believe, obey God, and obey the Prophet, and those who are in authority amongst you."¹⁴ Heffening uses the terms "*wilāyah*" and "*walāyah*" interchangeably; according to him, any free man can possess this authority.¹⁵ This interpretation and definition are from the Sunni perspective. The Shī'ī perspective is different.

In the Shī'ī concept, authority does not mean only secular authority. It primarily means spiritual authority. Authority in Shī'ī Ismā'īlī doctrine includes the authority to interpret the faith, Islam, and govern the community, *ummah*. Thus, *wilāyah* and *walāyah* both are from the same root. From *wilāyah* is *walī* which means protector and from *walāyah* is *mawlā* meaning lord. In other words, the meaning of the two terms together is the friend of God who has the authority as the lord. In the Shī'ī Ismā'īlī interpretation, the Imam is the *walī* and *mawlā* who has the exoteric and esoteric knowledge of the faith and has the prerogative to unveil its esoteric meaning (*ta'wīl*). Qualified Ismā'īlī theologians and

¹² Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1968).

¹³ W. Heffening, "*Wilāyah*," in *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. H. A. R. Gibb and J. H. Kramers (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1961), 633-34, at 633.

¹⁴ Qur'ān 4:59.

¹⁵ Heffening, "*Wilāyah*," 633.

scholars could only offer *ta'wīl* explanations with the Imam's guidance and his authorization and endorsement.¹⁶

Al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān (d. 974 CE), the chief jurist of the Fatimid Empire has devoted a full chapter in his book *Da'ā'im al-Islām* to the concept of *wilāyah*. He begins the discussion with a quotation from the verse of the Qur'ān: "Your protector is only God and His Messenger, and those who believe, who perform the prayer and give alms while bowing down."¹⁷

Following is a commentary on the above verse from a contemporary translation and commentary of the Qur'ān:

Shiites sometimes refer to this verse as the "verse of *wilāyah/walāyah*." Although *walī* is generally translated as "protector" or "friend," the position of *walī* and the corresponding state of *wilāyah/walāyah* are also spiritual concepts that hold particular importance for Shiites, who have used these terms traditionally to refer to the unique spiritual authority of 'Alī and his consequent right to succeed the Prophet as the spiritual and political leader of the Muslim community. They consider this verse to be a reference to 'Alī as the *walī* of the believers, after God and the Prophet, and thus interpret it as one of the clear indications of 'Alī's rightful authority over the Muslim community.¹⁸

Al-Nu'mān narrates that Imam Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d. 732 CE) explained *wilāyah* with the example of God's command to pray in the Qur'ān and the Prophet's elaboration of what the prayer was and how to pray, giving prayer practical form as the prescribed religious practice. In the same way, regarding God's commands about other religious obligations, the Prophet extensively expounded the ways of performing them with his practice (*sunnah*). Likewise, God ordained the *wilāyah* (devotion) due to the possessors of authority (*wulāt al-amr*). But the people did not know what *wilāyah* was, so God ordered His Prophet to explain to them what constituted *wilāyah* in the same manner as he had done in the case of prayer and other practices. Al-Mu'ayyad (d. 1078 CE) mentions, "Faith in the *walāyat* is the cornerstone of our religion."¹⁹

When the command regarding *wilāyah* came to the Prophet, he was very concerned and distressed because he feared that the community would not accept and turn against him declaring him false. The Prophet turned to God seeking relief from his troubling situation. Then, God

¹⁶ Wladimir Ivanow, *Brief Survey of the Evolution of Ismailism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1952), 25.

¹⁷ Qur'ān 5:55.

¹⁸ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ed., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), comments on 5:55.

¹⁹ Al-Mu'ayyad fī 'l-Dīn Shīrāzī, "Sermons," in *An Anthology of Philosophy in Persia*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr with Mehdi Aminrazavi (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008) 294-304, at 299.

revealed to him the following verse: “O Messenger! Make known that which hath been revealed unto thee from thy Lord, for if thou do it not, thou will not have conveyed His Message. Allah will protect thee from the people.”²⁰

Al-Mu’ayyad mentions that it was only the question of *wilāyah* that worried the Prophet the most. It was the ordinance about the *wilāyah*, the allegiance to ‘Alī and the Imams from amongst his descendants that he was now prepared to proclaim. The hesitation to deliver the ordinance and wait for a favourable time was because the Prophet found the people burning with hatred and jealousy. His doubts were cleared when the above verses were revealed to him. Al-Mu’ayyad further states that “it must be borne in mind that after the death of the Prophet, the belief in the *walāyat* of the Imams from his progeny is as important a part of our religion as the belief in the *walāyat* of the Prophet in his lifetime.”²¹ Addressing the pilgrims, the Prophet is reported to have said at Ghadīr Khumm:

“Am I not more precious to you than your selves. . . .” It is said, that in response to this question of the Prophet, when the *mu’mins* said, “Yes, you are dearer to us than our selves,” the Prophet said, “O God, be witness to their admission.” After this he said, “‘Alī is the master of one who acknowledges me to be his master. O God, love those who love ‘Alī. Help those who help ‘Alī. Desert those who desert ‘Alī. Let the truth accompany ‘Alī wherever he goes.”²²

Al-Mu’ayyad goes on to say that it was on this day that everything was made clear and the path was made smooth for the seekers of truth by the verse, “I have perfected your religion. I have bestowed on you My highest favours. I have chosen for you Islam as a religion.”²³ Thus, from the Shī‘ī perspective, this was the last verse to be revealed to the Prophet after having established the *wilāyah* of ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib as *waṣī*, that is, the trustee of the Prophet in the function of divine guidance and leadership of the community. Thus, according to Shī‘ī belief and interpretation, the Ghadīr Khumm pronouncement, along with the related verses of the Qur’ān, established the beginning of the chain of the hereditary Imamate in the family of the Prophet (*Ahl al-Bayt*). Each Imam in his time inherited this authority to interpret the Qur’ān, defend the precepts of the *sharī‘ah* and embody the Prophetic ethics in the practice of the faith. Under this divinely ordained authority (*wilāyah*) and as the sovereign

²⁰ Qur’ān 5:67.

²¹ Al-Mu’ayyad, “Sermons,” 299.

²² *Ibid.*, 299.

²³ Qur’ān 5:3.

religious leader (*walī* or *imām*), the Imam became responsible for the community to guide it in spiritual and worldly matters including instilling in them religious values and building their character with the practices within the framework of Islamic ethics. In the following, those values and ethical practices are discussed which the Ismā'īlī Imams have nurtured in the course of history. But, as we mentioned earlier, first we will briefly elucidate the methodology used in this research.

Methodology: Sources and Approach

For this research, in addition to the general literature on Ismā'īlī studies, a selected number of original works of the leading Ismā'īlī scholars known historically as *dā'ī* (pl. *du'āh*) have been used as primary sources. They include the Qur'ān, the *ḥadīths* of the Prophet, and orations of the Shī'ī Ismā'īlī imams; sources consisting of the specific guiding directives and advice of the Ismā'īlī imams to their followers collectively known as *jamā'at*; Imam's written guidance communicated through the leadership of the community (*ta'līqahs*, *sijjilāt*, and *pandiyāt*) and poetic composition (*kalām*); selected sources from the Ismā'īlī literature produced by Ismā'īlī scholars and *dā'īs* of the classical era; and finally, selected modern studies related to the Ismā'īlī doctrinal, historical, and intellectual traditions. In the Ismā'īlī doctrinal literature, the prime method of articulation and interpretation has been theological and philosophical hermeneutics known as *ta'wīl*, that is, “educing the *bāṭin* from the *zāhir*, or the inner meaning from the apparent wording.”²⁴

Ta'wīl, the foremost primary approach to the interpretation of the Qur'ān is a term derived from the Qur'ān itself. It is also referred to as Islamic hermeneutic and symbolic, in that, the ambiguous verses of the Qur'ān (*mutashābihāt*), detached letters (*al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭa'āt*), and the ritual and historical events are treated as symbols (*amthāl*) and their meanings are hidden. *Ta'wīl* is a way of revealing the inner meaning to uncover spiritual truths. Moving from *tanzīl* to *ta'wīl* is to transcend the word and know the spirit, the hidden message, and the purpose behind the words. In other words, it is getting to know through the symbols that they represent. Thus, the *ta'wīl* method became the hallmark of the Ismā'īlī tradition.²⁵

According to Nāṣir-i Khusrau's (d. 1088 CE) *Jāmi' al-Ḥikmatayn*, philosophical and scientific knowledge is in the realm of *zāhir*, the

²⁴ Farhad Daftary, *Historical Dictionary of the Ismailis* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 166.

²⁵ M. G. S. Hodgson, “Bāṭiniyya,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. B. Lewis, Ch. Pellat, and J. Schacht, 2nd ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), 1:1098-1100, at 1099; Daftary, *Historical Dictionary*, 166.

exoteric aspects of things. Conversely, *ta'wīl* addresses the esoteric understanding of the revelation, that is the *bāṭin*. The *bāṭin* is the privileged realm because it is not accessible to everyone. Ormsby comments in his introduction to *Jāmi' al-Ḥikmatayn*:

As the *Jāmi'* makes explicit, philosophy and science apply in the realm of the *ẓāhir*, the exoteric aspect of things, while *ta'wīl* addresses the privileged realm of the *bāṭin*, the esoteric understanding of the revelation. Neither realm is essentially separable from the other; they are complementary and constitute a whole. They are as independent as the bodily senses and the soul, each of which plays a fundamental role in the constitution of the human being and of the cosmos.²⁶

Only through *ta'wīl*, the signs, symbols, and metaphors can be explained. In the Ismā'īlī hermeneutics, *ta'wīl* “postulates the principle of the Imam as guardian of its secret.”²⁷ While philologically the Qur'ānic text is open to everyone to translate and interpret, but, for Ismā'īlīs, the unveiling of its inner meaning is entrusted by God only to the Prophet and the Imam. Symbolism is an important concept for the Ismā'īlīs in doctrinal interpretation. Both the Qur'ān and the universe are treated as books of symbols of God (*āyāt*). Nāṣir-i Khusrau calls the universe a book that is to be observed and the Qur'ān a book that is to be heard; both of them are the writing of God.²⁸ Besides theological, philosophical, and historical literature, poetics in Ismā'īlī thought has been a key element in its *ta'wīl* (hermeneutics). It is worth mentioning that in Ismā'īlī thought poetry authorized by the Imam-of-the-time has played a unique role in teaching, preaching, and the practice of faith. Devotional poetry is an integral part of the ritual practices of the community, reinforcing the concepts that are important from the Shī'ī perspective such as the notions of exoteric and esoteric (*ẓāhir-o bāṭin*). As Nāṣir-i Khusrau says,

See with the inner eye, the inner dimension of the world,	بچشم نهان بین نهان جهان را که چشم عیان بین نبیند نهان را
For the outward-looking eye cannot see the inward.	
What is the inward in the world, free people,	نهان در جهان چیست آزاده مردم

²⁶ Eric Ormsby, introduction to *Between Reason and Revelation: Twin Wisdom Reconciled* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 8.

²⁷ Henry Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*, trans. Philip Sherrard (London: KPI, 1986), 156.

²⁸ Corbin and Mohammad Mo'in, eds., *Jāmi' al-Ḥikmatayn* (Tehran: Kitābkhān-i Ṭahūrī, 1968), 232. Also see Eric Ormsby, trans., *Between Reason and Revelation: Twin Wisdom Reconciled* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 204.

You do not see the hidden but see the apparent.	نبینی نهان را به بینی عیان را
One cannot bind this world with iron, Hence bind this world with the chain of divine wisdom. ²⁹	جهان را باهن نشایدش بستن بزنجیر حکمت ببند این جهان را
For all the symbols and metaphors, the key Is entirely the household of the Prophet.	این همه رمز و مثلها را کلید جمله اندر خانه پیغمبر است
If they want to enter through the door of the house, The door of the blessed house is Haidar.	گر به خانه در ز راه در شوند این مبارک خانه را در حیدر است
Whoever followed the <i>tanzīl</i> without <i>ta'wīl</i> , He is a one-eyed person in the faith.	هر که بر تنزیل بی تأویل رفت او بچشم راست در دین اعور است
Word is like musk and meaning is its fragrance, Musk without fragrance is nothing but ashes. ³⁰	مشک باشد لفظ و معنی بوی او مشک بی بو ای پسر خاکستر است

Al-Mu'ayyad extensively uses the symbolism of the *mathal* and the *mamthūl* in his *Dīwān*. He also uses the two terms explicitly, saying the Qur'ān's exoteric linguistic expression conceals a deeper meaning.

What the Almighty said in his Book is a symbol, beneath which there is someone symbolized. ³¹	والذي قال في الكتابِ تعالَى مَثَلًا ذَاكَ نَحْتَهُ مَمْتُولُ
Strive towards the sanctuary of its symbolized one rather than the symbol, these are bees' proboscis and that is like honey. ³²	إفْصِدْ حَمَى مَمْتُولِهِ دُونَ الْمَثَلِ ذَا إِبْرُ النَّحْلِ وَ هَذَا

²⁹ Nāṣir-i Khusrāu Qubādiyānī, *Dīwān-i Ash'ār*, ed. Āqā-i Ḥājjī Sayyid Naṣr Allāh Taqawī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Tā'īd, 1956), 4, verses, 16-18.

³⁰ Ibid., verses, 20-23, 49.

³¹ Al-Mu'ayyad fī 'l-Dīn al-Shīrāzī, *Dīwān*, ed. Muḥammad Kāmil Ḥusayn (Cairo: Dār al-Kātib al-Miṣrī, 1949), 217. The translation is of Tahera Qutbuddin, trans., *Al-Mu'ayyad al-Shīrāzī and Fatimid Da'wa Poetry* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 108.

كالعسل

Its *ta'wīl* is preserved with one person alone, و تأويله مستودع عند واحد
If you do not seek it from him you will be و إن لم تسأله فزورا تأولنا
misled.

Aḥmad is the House of Light, its gate is no وأحمد بيت النور، لاشك
doubt, بابہ

Abu'l-Ḥasan "And the House is entered أبو حسن، "والبيت من بابہ
through the gate."³³ بقرتي "

For Ismā'īlīs, the interpretation of faith is the absolute prerogative of the Imam of the time. This privilege is based on the belief that there is a permanent need for mankind to have a flawless and divinely guided leader to govern the community justly and equitably. His *ta'lim* (teaching) lightens the *murīds'* (followers) path to spiritual enlightenment and vision. In temporal matters, he guides and motivates them to develop their potential. He leads them soundly in religion in the absence of the Prophet. Imam's authority, thus, is inextricably connected with the Prophetic chain which encompasses the entirety of the history of mankind.³⁴

Wilāyah and Ethics of Character Building

As mentioned earlier the Ismā'īlī sources dealing with the religious doctrines including moral and ethical values, in addition to the Qur'ān and the Prophetic traditions, are the sayings of the imams. These sayings indicate the ongoing flow of guidance to their followers (addressed as *mu'mins*, *murīds*, and *jamā'at*). These channels of guidance include extemporaneously addresses of the Imam (*farmāns*, *irshāds*), written notes of acknowledgement of submissions, and associated prayers and blessings (*ta'līqahs*, *sijillāt*).

These are the main sources from which the followers draw inspiration from the vision of the Imam and understand the concepts

³² Shīrāzī, *Dīwān*, 203; Qutbuddin, *Al-Mu'ayyad al-Shīrāzī*, 108.

³³ Shīrāzī, *Dīwān*, 293; Qutbuddin, *Al-Mu'ayyad al-Shīrāzī*, verses, 36-37; Mohamad Adra, trans., *Mount of Knowledge, Sword of Eloquence, Collected Poems of an Ismaili Muslim Scholar in Fatimid Egypt, A Translation from the original Arabic of al-Mu'ayyad al-Shīrāzī's Dīwān*, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), 191.

³⁴ For further details, see Mir Baiz Khan, "Ṭahārah: Principle of Purity in Ismā'īlī Interpretation," *Islamic Studies* 59, no. 4 (2020): 515-39.

related to preaching, teaching, and the development of intellectual and spiritual traditions in the community. Access to these internal community-specific documents is only with the Imam's approval. The materials produced in the wisdom sessions (*majālis al-ḥikmah*) during the Fatimid Empire era are an example of this genre of Ismā'īlī historical literature. As succinctly summarized in the quotation below:

The imam was the real source of wisdom (*ḥikma*) and the *dā'ī* merely his mouthpiece. The drafts for the lectures were probably prepared by the *dā'ī*, but they were then submitted to the imam, who would approve or perhaps correct them. Only thus was the authenticity and purity of the doctrine guaranteed.³⁵

For this research, we have chosen one such compilation which consists of the sermons by Imam al-Mustaṣir bi Allāh II (d. 1480 CE). The title of the compilation is *Pandiyāt-i Javānmardī* (Advice Relating to Bravery). The title consists of two Persian words *pandiyāt* and *javānmardī*. Translating literally, the former means advice or obligatory directives, and the latter means manliness or bravery. In terms of Ismā'īlī religious nomenclature, *javānmardī* means obligatory directives of the Imam for building a brave personality with ethical values of the highest order. In the following, a summary of the *pandiyāt-i javānmardī* is presented. The Imam addressing his followers says,

A true believer is brave to speak the truth, does not use bad language, and does not engage in slandering and verbal abuse. He speaks the truth; his actions are always proper and pious; he does not treat anyone with what he does not want himself to be treated with. He listens to the truth, walks on the path of truth, and keeps companionship with those who are truthful. His heart is clean and honest and he always remains clean (from the filth of body, mind, and habits).

A true believer remembers God incessantly and keeps the promise that he makes; in making a promise, he is always sincere and reliable, and he never breaks it. He eats what is his right to eat and refrains from what is not his right to eat; he is content with what belongs to him; he never craves for anything which is not his right, he never puts any crumb of food which is unlawful in his mouth thereby polluting it.

A true believer does not cultivate anger and hatred in his heart; he does not flare up instantly nor is he impulsive; and he looks after his heart to remain pure and sincere. Embodying the values of patience, piety, sincerity and truthfulness, purity of beliefs and modesty, and being free of rage and hatred, with these deeds, a true believer sees God present in front of him. In the hereafter, he will be with his lord,

³⁵ Heinz Halm, *The Fatimids and Their Traditions of Learning* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1997), 46.

meaning his Imam, a reference to the verse of the Qur'ān, "On the Day We shall call every people by their imam."³⁶ A true believer is generous and kind.

If one follows his Imam's advice, every day his morals, words, and acts will improve like a patient's recovery from illness until he is healthy. God the All-Forgiving will help him which means that the mirror of his heart is clean of rust, his faith will grow stronger, his actions will be honest, his earnings will be lawful, and it will be from lawful sources that he will spend in the way of God. You must act according to what the true teacher says so that you may attain perfection.³⁷

In line with the guidance of the Imam and his direction, Ismā'īlī scholars, poets, and philosophers have expounded on the principles of ethics and elaborated them in the language of experts as well as of the common people. The following are verses from Nāṣir-i Khusrau's book of poetry *Raushnā'ī Nāmāh* (Epistle of Light). The author has another book with the same name in prose which scholars generally call *Shish Faṣl* (Six Chapters), probably to make a distinction between the two books with the same title. This book has two sections. The first section is what he calls *faṣl fī 'l-naṣīḥah* (chapter on advice) or *naṣīḥat nāmāh* (epistle of advice). Its contents are like that of *Pandiyāt-i Javānmardī* in poetic form. The objective is to instil Islamic ethical values in members of the community to build in them a faithful, honest, and enlightened character. The second section is on doctrinal and philosophical concepts and deals with religio-philosophical ethics. The selected verses below are from the first section. Nāṣir-i Khusrau's purpose in composing this work was:

. . . to help the reader to know himself and forsake the concerns of earthly life, the transient world of darkness, and concentrate instead on the requirements of the permanent residence, the heavenly world, the world of eternal light. Until man fathoms his own universe, he cannot understand God. . . . According to the poem, knowing oneself is the golden key to true wisdom, which prepares the soul for its higher life and brighter destiny.³⁸

Selected verses from the *Raushanā'ī Nāmāh* are translated here.

³⁶ Qur'ān 17:71.

³⁷ Mustanṣir bi'llāh [II], *Pandiyāt-i Jawānmardī*, ed. And trans. Wladimir Ivanow (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1957), 8.

³⁸ Mohsen Zakeri, "The *Rawshanā'ī-nāma* and the Older Iranian Cosmogony," in *Pearls of Persia: The Philosophical Poetry of Nāṣir-i Khusraw*, ed. Alice C. Hunsberger (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 103-16, at 105.

On life's journey, not for a moment be unthoughtful of God, Since you know death can come unexpectedly.	دمی از حق مشو غافل در این راه چو میدانی که آید مرگ ناگاه
Seek His help in all matters, For none other than Him is your real helper.	از او خواه استعانت در همه کار که چون او کس نباشد مر ترا یار
When make a commitment to someone, fulfill it, Since a promise is part of faith, do not abandon it.	چو عهدی با کسی کردی بجا آر که ایمانست عهد از خویش مگذار
If patience is a companion of your heart, Ultimately success becomes your sweetheart.	اگر صبرت بدل در یار گردد ظفر آخر ترا دلدار گردد
When do a favor (to someone), do not oblige him, For it nullifies generosity and kindness.	نکوئی گر کنی منت منه زان که باطل شد زمنت جود و احسان
A person's tongue becomes calamity for him, That is tied to many of his malice and injuries.	بلای آدمی باشد زبانش که دروی بسته بسی شر و زیانش
Humility brings honour to you, From arrogance comes bad reputation.	تواضع مر ترا دارد گرامی زکبر آید بدی در نیک نامی
Make generosity your habit within your capacity, By which strangers become like kith and kin.	سخاوت پیشه کن تو از کم وبیش کزان بیگانگان گردند چون خویش
The beauty of a person is his patience, Perfection of a person is in knowledge.	جمال مردمی در حلم باشد کمال آدمی در علم باشد
Treat friendship with intellect as good fortune, Since God (Himself) chooses people of intellect.	غنیمت همنشینی با خرد دان که اهل عقل را بگزید یزدان
Modesty brings friendship with angel, From immodesty, you get close to fiends.	ز شرم ار با فرشته همنشینی ز بی شرمی تو با دیوان قرینی

A wise adversary of yours is much better than
Hundred unwise friends of yours.

عدوی عاقلت بهتر بسی زان
که باشد مر ترا صد دوست
نادان

When do a favor, do it to the deserving,

اگر احسان کنی با مستحق
کن

Not in hypocrisy, but for God's sake.

نه از بهر ریا از بهر حق کن

Man has no faith if devoid of generosity,

ندارد دین اگر مردی سخی
نیست

If generous, he never suffers hereafter.³⁹

اگر باشد سخی او دوزخی
نیست

Wilāyah and Ethics of Service

For this section, we have selected Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Nīsābūrī's (d. 996) book *al-Risālah al-Mūjazah al-Kāfiyah fī Adab al-Du'āh* (The Brief and Sufficient Epistle on the Code of Conduct and Etiquette of the Missionaries), as our primary source. Al-Nīsābūrī was a Fatimid *dā'ī* who was born in Nīsābūr/Nīshāpūr, Khurāsān, and spent most of his life in Egypt. He authored several books, one of which is this *Risālah*. The book has not survived directly but the text is preserved in two other sources.⁴⁰ Verena Klemm has partially translated it and discussed it in summary.⁴¹ Another full translation of al-Nīsābūrī's *Risālah* is rendered by Paul Walker.⁴²

The code of ethics for the preacher and teacher in Islam is reflected in the verses of the Qur'ān as God says, "Call unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom and goodly exhortation. And dispute with them in the most virtuous manner,"⁴³ and the Prophet's teaching consisted in imparting the knowledge of the Book and wisdom (*al-Kitāb wa 'l-ḥikmah*).⁴⁴ Klemm, possibly in reference to these verses and drawing on al-Nīsābūrī's *Risālah*, mentions that God's summons, continuously taken up by the

³⁹ Nāṣir-i Khusrau, *Raushanā'ī Nāmāh*, ed. Sayyid Naṣr Allāh Taqavī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Ta'yīd-i Iṣfahānī, 1925-28), 512-15.

⁴⁰ See Farhad Daftary, *Ismā'īlī Literature: A Bibliography of Sources and Studies* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 141.

⁴¹ Verena Klemm, *Memoirs of a Mission: The Ismā'īlī Scholar, Statesman and Poet al-Mu'ayyad fī 'l-Dīn al-Shīrāzī* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003), 117-27, appendix 2, also see pp. 58-66.

⁴² Paul Walker, trans., "Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Nīsābūrī: Al-Risālah al-Mūjazah al-Kāfiyah fī Adab al-Du'āt," in *An Anthology of Ismā'īlī Literature: A Shi'i Version of Islam*, ed. Hermann Landolt, Samira Sheikh, and Kutub Kassam (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008), 222-33.

⁴³ Qur'ān 16:125.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:129.

prophets, imams, and *dā'īs*, addresses all believers and wants to arouse desire in them to strive for knowledge and reach the door of the *da'wah*, the Ismā'īlī mission. She goes on to state that Al-Nīsābūrī wanted to provide those who were associated with the Ismā'īlī *da'wah* system with the information and knowledge that was necessary for them in terms of ethical, religious, pedagogical, and diplomatic aspects of their work. Summarizing the *Risālah*, Klemm has discussed the ethics of the *dā'īs* under three headings, namely, obedience to God (*taqwā*), authority to govern (*siyāsah*), and knowledge (*'ilm*).

Self-Discipline (Taqwā)

Al-Nīsābūrī defines the term *taqwā* as knowing and acting with faith, following the commands and prohibitions of the Qur'ān. The foremost duty of an Ismā'īlī *dā'ī* is *taqwā* towards God, the Only One, and the indescribable. To advance in the *da'wah* hierarchy, however, a *dā'ī* had to have *taqwā* towards the authorities in the *da'wah* system. *Taqwā* also means to possess virtues and refrain from vices, in that, he must exercise self-discipline. Through self-control, he keeps his person in order, guides it, and prepares it for taming his physical condemnable desires and despicable craving passions. Keeping these reprehensible desires under control prevents “overestimation of the body at the expense of the strength of character,”⁴⁵ which, if allowed, eventually leads to greediness and materialism. In addition to bringing corruption to the *da'wah* system, abominable acts result in the annulment of the oath of allegiance that a *dā'ī* has taken and the closure of the office commissioned to him.

Authority to Govern (Siyāsah)

To observe *taqwā* in behaviour and action, an Ismā'īlī *dā'ī* was required to possess three kinds of authority to govern (*siyāsah*), namely, authority to govern himself (*siyāsat al-khāṣṣah*), to govern his family (*siyāsat al-ḥāmmah*), and to govern the community (*siyāsat al-'āmmah*). Authority to govern one's self, according to al-Nīsābūrī, means knowing and acting together with faith, that is, to follow the orders and prohibitions of the Qur'ān, and in doing so to govern himself and to care for his soul by restraining it from vices and bad habits, guarding it against reprehensible desires and illicit acts and behaviour. He must refrain from acts and behaviours that lead to corruption and breaking his oath of allegiance to be loyal to the Imam. Al-Nīsābūrī quotes Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, saying, “Be for us silent *dā'īs*.’ They asked, “How can we summon if we are silent?” He answered, “Act in accord with what actions we

⁴⁵ Klemm, *Memoirs of a Mission*, 60.

commanded of you and in obedience to God. Make illicit those acts of disobedience that we ordered you to prohibit.”⁴⁶ A *dā'ī* who is self-disciplined is fit and able to govern others too as the Qur'ān reveals: “O you who believe, guard your own souls, the one who goes stray cannot hurt you if you are guarded aright.”⁴⁷

A *dā'ī*'s authority to govern his family and relatives implies his power of reasoning (*ra'y*) and intellect (*'aql*) to be of a high degree. With his authoritative knowledge and leadership characteristics, he teaches and educates them, instils the virtues in them restrains them from vices, and rewards and punishes them per their goodness and wickedness respectively. As God commands, “O you who believe, guard yourselves and your family from the fire.”⁴⁸ Al-Nīsābūrī states, “He who succeeds in governing himself and his family is fit to have charge of governing the rest of the people in matters of faith and he who cannot govern himself and his family is not fit to be a *dā'ī*.”⁴⁹

A *dā'ī* who has the necessary knowledge and leadership qualities to govern the community is expected to arrange and regulate affairs in the areas that are assigned to him as his duties and responsibilities. He also has to be aware that the religious order is built on maintaining the confidentiality of matters of faith that are to be kept protected from those who have nothing to do with them. Exposing confidential matters will enable the community's adversaries to hurt its *da'wah* system. A *dā'ī* must educate those who are below him in knowledge and determine their level of knowledge and abilities to lead by testing them, trying them, and arranging their affairs as well as rewarding and punishing them by their ranks. Education of the lower ranking *dā'īs* would include enhancing their knowledge of religious principles, teaching moral and ethical values, keeping them away from vices, and inspiring them to develop virtues to build in them a strong virtuous character.

The Imam supports *dā'īs* with his knowledge and resources in coping with the situations of order and disorder not as rulers or judges, but by having the authority delegated to them by the Imam and being closest to the people. While a *dā'ī*'s primary responsibility is to look after the Ismā'īlī community, he engages intellectually, socially, and politically with other communities within the Muslim community at large, the *ummah*, provides Ismā'īlī perspective on matters related to faith and dealing with the social and political issues of concerns for the

⁴⁶ See Walker, “Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Naysābūrī,” 225.

⁴⁷ Qur'ān 5:105.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 66:6.

⁴⁹ Walker, “Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Naysābūrī,” 225.

community. Since he represents the Imam, the *dā'ī* in dealing with other communities must remain steadfast in his commitment to the ethical framework. In his communication, conversation, and even disputation, he should reason to the best of reasoning.

The Knowledge ('ilm)

The *dā'ī*'s knowledge should be to the level that is commensurate with his rank in the *da'wah* hierarchy. Al-Nīsābūrī differentiates, as do other Ismā'īlī thinkers, between exoteric (*zāhir*) and esoteric (*bāṭin*) knowledge. Exoteric knowledge is general and acquired while esoteric knowledge is private and instilled. The esoteric knowledge is imparted at three levels, namely, knowledge through senses (*'ilm al-maḥsūs*), abstract knowledge (*'ilm al-mawhūm*), and logical or intellectual knowledge (*'ilm al-ma'qūl*).

Al-Kirmānī (d. after 1020 CE) explains that knowledge is of two kinds; knowledge of the eternal (*al-ma'lūmāt al-abadiyyah*) and knowledge of the worldly situations (*al-ma'lūmāt al-dunyāwiyyah*). Both types of knowledge have sub-categories in a hierarchical order in terms of nobility. The knowledge of the eternal is nobler because, through it, human souls attain the status of the intellect and remain eternally in that holy abode (*al-dār al-muqaddasah*). The knowledge of worldly situations is inferior in the sense that it does not elevate the human soul in its abstraction (*bi mujarradihā*) to achieve perfection. The knowledge of the eternal is not available to everyone as is the case of the knowledge of worldly situations. Al-Kirmānī, providing a logical reason, states that anything valuable requires care and protection, the higher the value the greater its vulnerability, and such a precious thing needs to be kept under the seal (*khatm*). In the same way, the knowledge of the eternal requires a special guard for its safety due to its nobility and vulnerability, so that it can be available to those who are aware of its value. Thus, the Prophet in his time and each Imam in his time are the repositories of this special kind of entrusted knowledge (*al-'ilm al-makḥṣūṣ*).⁵⁰

According to al-Nīsābūrī, the *'ilm al-maḥsūs* is the basic knowledge suitable for beginners “like the suckling of a baby.” The *'ilm al-mawhūm* is abstract knowledge comprehended through reflection on the heavenly bodies and spiritual hierarchies in the initiation and continuation of creation. The *'ilm al-ma'qūl* is the knowledge of the true meaning of things, their origin, and final destination. It is the absolute truth that never changes. Although only the Imam can possess the knowledge in all

⁵⁰ Mir Baiz Khan, *The Necessity of Bay'ah* (Karachi: Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board for Pakistan, 1989), 10–12, at 11.

its forms, a *dā'ī*, at the lower rank, is required to have some knowledge of its principles.⁵¹

***Wilāyah* and Ethics of Loyalty**

The primary source for this section is *Kitāb al-Himmah fī Ādāb Atbā' al-A'imma* by al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān b. Muḥammad. This book has been translated into English in an abridged version by Jawat Muscati and Khan Bahadur A. M. Moulvi as the *Code of Conduct for the followers of Imam*.

Al-Nu'mān introduces his book by stating that firm faith in the *wilāyah* (authority), submission to the Imamate, and devotion to the Imam are the basic principles of ethics. According to him, those who are knowledgeable about the position of the Imam and have firm faith in his Imamate should consider their obedience to the Imam as a duty enjoined upon them by God. Their regard for the glory and sublimity of the Imam should be greater than the subjects and officials of a monarchy have for their king. Obedience to the Imam as a divinely ordained obligation is based on the verse of the Qur'ān, "O you who believe! Obey God and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you."⁵²

Those who possess authority (*ulū 'l-amr*), in Ismā'īlī interpretation, are the imams from *Ahl al-Bayt*, that is, from the progeny of 'Alī, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet and the husband of Fāṭimah, the Prophet's daughter. al-Nu'mān cites another verse of the Qur'ān: "Say, 'I ask not of you any reward for it, save affection among kinsfolk.'"⁵³ He states that it is obligatory to love the *Ahl al-Bayt* and the imams belonging to it. Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq explained that the kinsfolk are the *Ahl al-Bayt*, he who loves us will rise with us on the Day of Judgement, and religion is nothing but love, as God says, "He made you love your faith and adorned it in your hearts."⁵⁴ This Qur'ānic concept of love for the Imam was further articulated by Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 1279 CE). Al-Ṭūsī in his *Risālah-i Tawallā-o Tabarrā* (Epistle of Solidarity and Dissociation) has elaborated on "how one may arrive at spiritual perfection through 'solidarity' with 'Alī and the Imams, and 'dissociation' from one's base instincts such as lust, anger, and hatred."⁵⁵ Al-Nu'mān mentions,

⁵¹ Klemm, *Memoirs of a Mission*, 62.

⁵² Qur'ān 4:59.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 42:23.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 49:7.

⁵⁵ Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī, *Contemplation and Action: The Spiritual Autobiography of a Muslim Scholar*, trans. S. J. Badakhchani, new ed. (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999), 17. For Persian text, also see Khawājah Naṣīr al-Dīn Muḥammad Ṭūsī, *Akhlāq-i Muḥtashamī*, ed.

To hold the Imams in the highest esteem is a duty enjoined on us by God. He has associated the devotion to them with the devotion to Himself and the devotion to the Prophet. He has emphasized our devotion to them and has further ordered us to refer our disputes to them.⁵⁶

Serving the Imam requires the highest ethical behaviour, particularly when serving in a position of responsibility and trust. The individual follower has to be honest about himself and whether he is fit to take up the responsibility offered to him by the Imam. Hiding one's deficiencies from the Imam is akin to an act of deception to God, the Prophet, and *waṣī*, 'Alī, the Prophet's legate. But if he informs the Imam of all his defects and speaks the truth about himself, then it is up to the Imam to assign the responsibility to him or someone else. If he is the one who is given the task, then "it matters little whether he knows the job or not."

The devotion to the Imam should be unwavering and unconditional. The devotee should strictly follow the Imam's instructions and guidance regardless of whether he finds them agreeable to himself or not. He should persevere in carrying them out and disciplining his mind in the direction indicated to him. In due course, he will find them agreeable "when the significance of what he fails to understand now will ultimately dawn on his mind."⁵⁷

Being in the Imam's presence is a lifelong dream for any Ismā'īlī. When that opportunity becomes available, the follower should be clean and immaculately dressed up, and in case of receiving recognition from the Imam, he should present himself in a ceremonious dress. This is out of respect for the position that he has been bestowed.⁵⁸

Being in the presence of the Imam is a privilege that no one has a right to. If the Imam asks anyone to sit, then only, one should sit down with gratitude to the Imam for his benevolence. This is the etiquette for the highest position one can aspire to and the greatest favour he can look for from the Imam.

Muḥammad Taqī Dānish Pizhūh (Tehran: Mu'assasah-i Intishārāt-o Chāb, Dānishgāh-i Tahrān, 1982), 561-77.

⁵⁶ Jawad Muscati and K. B. Maulvi, trans., *Selections from Qādī Nu'mān's Kitāb al-Himma fi Ādāb Atbā' al-A'imma* (Mombasa: The Shia Imami Ismailia Association for Africa, 1966), 31.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 64-65.

⁵⁸ It is a long-established tradition that the Ismā'īlī Imam bestows titles and ropes of honour on those whose performance in the eyes of the Imam has been outstanding. The honorific cloak is known as *khil'ah* or *jubbah* and the headgear as *'amamah* or *pagri* which are worn on important ceremonial occasions.

How learned a scholar may be, he needs to show humility in conversation with the Imam. Al-Nu'mān explains:

The signs and symbols used by the Imams in the course of their conversation with us and hints dropped by them are a fathomless ocean. None can dive deep into it except those whose hearts have been illumined by God. They, too, cannot master all the subtleties in the conversation of the Imams. In this connection, if I were to describe my own experience and the difficulties that I had in understanding them, the matter will prolong and will exceed the limits of my book.⁵⁹

While with the Imam, if the Imam wishes to speak to an individual in privacy, then those sitting close to the individual should move away from him. All those who are present should refrain from trying to overhear the private conversation of the Imam. Conversations that take place during a meeting with the Imam and matters communicated in confidence are confidential and treated as his trust (*amānah*). No restriction applies to fully publicizing the good things about the Imam and the favours he bestows upon his followers. Wrangling or indulging in disputes using foul language or talking ill of others in the presence of the Imam are prohibited. In the Imam's presence, one must plead for his own case.

Wilāyah and Ethics of Protocol

The official who moves about with the Imam has to strictly follow the official protocol that is prescribed for him to follow. For instance, the person assigned the duty to be in front of the Imam should always be mindful of the distance he is required to maintain between him and the Imam. He should be focused not allowing anything that distracts his attention to compromise in maintaining a precise distance. He should treat the matter seriously even if it appears to be insignificant.⁶⁰

He should always maintain the etiquette of demonstrating his respect for the Imam, keeping up the dignity of his behaviour, and refraining from talking at random and speaking to the Imam unless he orders him to speak. He should be very vigilant and concentrate all his attention on the Imam. If the Imam calls any one of the officials, he should run to him with his face towards him and eyes fixed on the ground. He should hear what the Imam says, and after doing what he is asked to do, he should immediately resume his position.⁶¹

The official should never look upon this position as a permanent affair; he should always wait for the orders of the Imam and look upon it

⁵⁹ Muscati and Maulvi, *Selections from Qāḍī Nu'mān's Kitāb al-Himma*, 116.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 119-20.

as nothing but a favour from the Imam. If he is favoured or honoured by the Imam, he should not think that he has received that which was his right or treat it as an established precedent. The Imam favours those whom he likes and withdraws his favours when he likes.⁶²

***Wilāyah* and Ismā'īlī Vision of Cosmopolitan Ethics**

In his Convocation address at Peshawar University on November 30, 1967, the present Imam of the Ismā'īlīs, Shāh Karīm al-Husainī Aga Khan, posed the question:

If the developing nations succeed in raising their standards of living to such an extent that there is far greater freedom and privilege to enjoy leisure, how is this leisure to be used, and what values will govern its use?

The question then raised was an ethical one in broad terms covering both the developing world in general and the Muslim world in particular. The Imam hoped that if the Islamic society were to avoid blindly following the Western society and guard itself against its weaknesses and deficiencies, a thorough rediscovery, revitalization, and integration of traditional Islamic values had to be achieved.⁶³ Explaining metaphorically, the Imam said,

They must be drawn forth from under the decades of foreign rule which have accumulated like thick sets of paper that have rested for generations on top of the finest oriental painting making the edges turn yellow, but the centerpiece remaining as colorful and lively, for us to discover, as when it was originally completed.⁶⁴

“The finest oriental painting” that the Imam was referring to was the traditional Islamic ethical values and principles that were being shrouded in the overwhelmingly dominant colonial Western secular values. As the Imam put it,

It must never be said generations hence that in our greed for the material good of the rich West we have forsaken our responsibilities to the poor, to the orphans, to the traveler, to the single woman.⁶⁵

Expressing his concern for the deterioration of the Islamic ethical system and aspirations for its rejuvenation, Aga Khan suggested the following:

Our religious leaders must be acutely aware of secular trends, including those generated by this age of science and technology. Equally, our

⁶² Ibid., 120.

⁶³ Prince Karim Aga Khan, “Convocation Address, Peshawar University, November 30, 1967,” in *The Muslim World, Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (Karachi: His Royal Highness The Aga Khan Ismailia Federal Council for Pakistan, 1977), 7-13.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 6.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

academic or secular elite must be deeply aware of Muslim history, of the scale and depth of leadership exercised by the Islamic Empire of the past in all fields.⁶⁶

In looking for exemplars to revive and restructure the Islamic ethical system, the Imam reflected on the life of the Prophet. In his address to the Seerat Conference, held in Karachi, Pakistan on March 12, 1976, the Imam reminded the *ummah*, the community of all Muslims that the best examples are found in the life of Prophet Muhammad. He said,

The Holy Prophet's life gives us every fundamental guideline that we require to resolve the problem as successfully as our human minds and intellects can visualize. His example of integrity, loyalty, honesty, generosity both of means and of time, his solicitude for the poor, the weak, and the sick, his steadfastness in friendship, his humility in success, his magnanimity in victory, his simplicity, his wisdom in conceiving new solutions for problems which could not be solved by traditional methods, without affecting the fundamental concepts of Islam, surely all these are foundations which, correctly understood and sincerely interpreted, must enable us to conceive what should be a truly modern and dynamic Islamic Society in the years ahead.⁶⁷

With this vision of the future of Muslim society, the Imam has further crystalized his vision giving it a practical form through the work of the Ismā'īlī Imamate in the contemporary world. The ethical values that permeate the Imamate activities in the current context revolve around three ethical principles: human dignity, inclusivity in development, and pluralistic civil society.

***Wilāyah* and Ethics of Pluralism**

Aga Khan, on many occasions, has explained the significance of diversity and pluralism as critically important human values. What follows is a summary of his vision in this regard. According to the Ismā'īlī Imam, pluralism is one of the fundamental human values that must be preserved and enhanced to avoid costly conflict and solve human problems. It is a deliberate set of choices that society must make to harness the power of its diversity.⁶⁸ Pluralism is the recognition that people of diverse backgrounds and interests, organizations and projects

⁶⁶ Aga Khan, "Convocation Address, The University of Sind, Jamshoro, February 6, 1970," in *The Muslim World, Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (Karachi: His Royal Highness The Aga Khan Ismailia Federal Council for Pakistan, 1977), 14-22.

⁶⁷ Aga Khan, "Presidential Address: International Seerat Conference," in *The Muslim World Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (Karachi: Ismaili Federal Council for Pakistan, 1977), 23-28.

⁶⁸ Aga Khan, *Where Hope Takes Root: Democracy and Pluralism in an Interdependent World* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2008), 133-35.

of different types, and different kinds and forms of creative expression are valuable and deserve to be recognized and supported by the government and society. Without support for pluralism, civil society does not function.⁶⁹ The role of leadership in this regard can help sustain the moral and dynamic coherence in public life that is predicated on the ethic of respect for human dignity. This coherence acknowledges the difference and builds on it.⁷⁰ Pluralism can be achieved in a society that is diverse and the more diverse it is, the more pluralistic it can potentially be. Diversity can be an engine of enormous creativity if it is sustained by what the Imam calls cosmopolitan ethics. Referring to the Global Centre for Pluralism which the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) has created in partnership with the Government of Canada, he stated: “We cannot make the world safe for democracy unless we also make the world safe for diversity.”⁷¹ The following excerpt from the speech of the Imam signifies the value of pluralism in the context of Islamic ethics.

In the case of Islam, there are two touchstones I have long treasured and sought to apply. The first affirms the unity of the human race, as expressed in the Holy Quran where God, as revealed through the Holy Prophet Muhammad (may peace be upon him) says the following: “O mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord, Who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate and from the twain hath spread abroad a multitude of men and women.” (4:1) This remarkable verse speaks both of the inherent diversity of mankind—the multitude—and of the unity of humankind—the single soul created by a single Creator—a spiritual legacy that distinguishes the human race from all other forms of life.⁷²

***Wilāyah* and Ethics of Bridging Faith and Society**

The quality of the civil society is created and sustained by sharing many forms of human knowledge and experience rather than a massive injection of monetary resources.⁷³ The engagement of the Imamate in development is guided by the ethics of Islam that bridge faith and society on which, the Imam says, he established the AKDN. Its cultural, social, and economic development agencies seek to improve opportunities and living conditions of the weakest in society, without regard to their origin, gender, or faith. It is on this ethical premise,

⁶⁹ Ibid., 15-27.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 37-50.

⁷¹ Ibid., 112-23.

⁷² Ibid., 126.

⁷³ Ibid., 54.

which bridges faith and society, that the Imam established the AKDN.⁷⁴ In the Muslim ethical tradition, which links spirit and matter, the Imam leads not only in the interpretation of the faith but also in the effort to improve the quality of life of his community and of the wider societies within which that community lives. A guiding principle of the Imamate's institutions is to replace walls that divide with bridges that unite.⁷⁵ Civil society, as the Imam defines it, includes an array of institutions that operate on a private, voluntary basis but are motivated by high public purposes.⁷⁶ A civil society that values a cosmopolitan ethic welcomes the complexity of human society, "an ethic for all peoples, the familiar and the Other, whether they live across the street or the planet."⁷⁷

Wilāyah and Ethics of Human Dignity

Regardless of the context in which Muslims live, they all share "the commitment to an ethic whose values converge on the inherent dignity of the human person as the noblest of creation."⁷⁸ It is one of the universal human values "broadly shared across divisions of class, race, language, faith and geography" and a value that is "not merely the absence of negative restraints on individual freedom, but also a set of positive responsibilities, moral discipline that prevent liberty from turning into license."⁷⁹ Revolving around the ethic of human dignity and underpinning its expressions through institutional actions, the AKDN, the Ismā'īlī Imamate's network of institutions, in its ethical framework spells out various aspects of the ethics of development. It articulates ethics in terms of inclusiveness, education, and research, the spirit of inquiry, compassion, and sharing, self-reliance, respect for life and health care, sound mind, sustainable physical, social, and cultural environment, and governance.⁸⁰

To achieve the ethics of excellence, Ismā'īlīs draw, as all Muslims do, from the Qur'ān and the life of Prophet Muḥammad. While deriving the principles from the Qur'ān, Ismā'īlī imams, since the lifetime of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, the first Imam for the Shī'ī Muslims, have interpreted the faith

⁷⁴ Ibid., 58.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 94-100.

⁷⁶ <https://the.akdn/en/resources-media/resources/speeches/address-both-houses-parliament-canada-house-commons-chamber-his-highness-the-aga-khan>.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Aga Khan, *Where Hope Takes Root*, 94-100.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 121.

⁸⁰ *Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN): An Ethical Framework* (London: The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2000), <https://d1zah1nkiby91r.cloudfront.net/s3fs-public/ethical-factsheet.pdf> AKDN Ethical Framework.

and provided leadership in articulating the ethical principles and guiding in translating them into practice. However, practices are subject to the conditions of time and place, they are redefined, transformed, and replaced as conditions change. What remains perennial, unalterable, and permanent are the principles, the roots upon which grow the ethical gardens of the Islamic faith with the flowers of ethical behaviour and actions in their immense diversity and beauty. For Ismā'īlīs today, the present Imam of the time in his absolute authority to interpret the faith, *wilāyah*, provides the vision and guidance to his followers as have done all his predecessor imams in the time of their respective Imamate to achieve the true ideal of ethical excellence. An excerpt from the *AKDN Ethical Framework* succinctly summarizes this as follows:

By grounding social values in the principle of human moral responsibility to the divine, Islam lifts the sense of public and social order to a transcendent level. The lasting legacy of the Prophet Muhammad is the strong suffusion of the mundane, of daily life, with a sense of the spiritual. This prophetic example remains a source of emulation for Muslims everywhere, in every age. Within Shia Islam, it is the mandate of each hereditary Imam from the Prophet's progeny, as the legatee of the Prophet's authority, to seek to realise that paradigm through an institutional and social order which befits the circumstances of time and place. In a world of flux, the Imam gives leadership in the maintenance of balance between the spiritual and the material in the harmonious context of the ethics of the faith, of which he is the guardian.⁸¹

This passage recaptures the key principle, that the authority of the Imam is the core of building the ethical edifice in the Ismā'īlī Ṭarīqah of Islam which is also clearly expressed in an authorized prayer as to how a follower aspires to achieve ethical excellence through the Imam of the time: "O Allah! Bestow Your blessings and mercy upon the Imams and make us through them worthy (lit. faces of excellent moral and ethical character) in this world and the hereafter among those who have been brought near to You."⁸²

Conclusion

Wilāyah, in Shī'ī Imāmī Ismā'īlī Ṭarīqah of Islam, is the exclusive authority of the Imam and the core principle acting as the lynchpin for the other principles of interpretation governing the material and spiritual aspects of the followers' life. All interpretations by the scholars, preachers, and educators other than that of the Imam are but individual opinions, perspectives, and personal interpretations and they do not

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Unpublished, the end part of the special prayer read out in the community globally to celebrate the Imam's golden jubilee.

represent the community and its religious and intellectual traditions. The key aspect of this authority is that it is the present living Imam who decides what of the inherited traditions can serve his followers best at a given time during the time of his Imamate and what can prepare them for the future. The second point that scholars who are interested in Ismā'īlī studies may explore is that in the Ismā'īlī doctrinal literature, the institution of Imamate is not accidental but by the designation of God, the Most High, according to the Qur'ān and by the choice of the Prophet. The third point that interested scholars may examine is how Ismā'īlīs seek excellence through individual personal search or collectively as a global community in all ethical dimensions of life, in that the living present Imam embodies as the exemplar for all the elements of excellence in the Prophetic tradition as its guardian. The followers in this endeavour find inspiration from the Imam's guidance and try to emulate the values that the Imam highlights underpinning the actions of personal, communal, and global nature.

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