The Ismaili Shia Community in the Perspective of Ahl al- Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah: A Comparative Analysis of Beliefs and Practices

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Abstract:
This paper conducts a comparative analysis of the Ismaili Shia community from the perspective of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah, examining the beliefs and practices that have shaped their distinct identity within the broader Islamic framework. Emphasizing the significance of adhering to the Qur'an and Sunnah (teachings of Prophet Muhammad), the study analyzes the warning against innovations (bid'ah) and the call for unity within the framework of the "saved sect." The paper concludes with warning against deviating from their guidance, as articulated in various verses from the Qur'an and the sayings of Prophet Muhammad.
Keywords: *Ismaili Shia; Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah; Nizari Ismaili; Isma'il; Aga Khan; Islamic sects; Doctrinal divisions; Bid'ah; Beliefs and practices; Innovations (bid'ah)*

Introduction

After Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), divergence of opinions gave rise to two major factions: Ahl Al-Sunnah, contending that the people should choose the caliph, and the Shia, advocating divine appointment through the Prophet's explicit selection of Ali ibn Abi Talib as his successor. [1]emerges as a distinctive subset,tracing its roots to the belief that Isma'il ibn Ja'far, the elder son of Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, should have been recognized as the seventh Imam[2]. Ismailism, a branch of Shia Islam, emphasizes the lineage of Imams through Isma'il and his descendants, offering a unique interpretation of their role and authority. This subset experienced internal divisions, notably after the death of the Fatimid Caliph-Imam al-Mustansir Billah in 1094 CE, leading to the formation of the Nizari Ismaili faction. In

[1] Ayatullah Nasir Makarim Syirazi, Ma'rifat Al-Imamah, ed. Musa dan Syamsur Al-Kadzi (Yayasan Assajjad, 1990), I.
[2] Muhammad Abu Zahrah, Tarikhul Al Mazahib Al Islamiyah (Beirut: Dar Fikr,n.d.), 341

contemporary times, followers of the Aga Khan are identified as Nizari Ismailis, illustrating the enduring impact and evolution of this distinct strand within the rich tapestry of Shia Islam. Ismailism is a distinct and intellectually vibrant branch of Shia Islam that dates to the early days of Islam. It has evolved into a diverse tradition with a unique interpretation of Islamic teachings, encompassing both spiritual and political dimensions. Also known as Seveners, Ismailism is characterized by its reverence for the line of Imams descended from Isma'il ibn Jafar, the sixth Shia Imam. The genesis of Ismailism can be traced to a schism in the 8th century within the Shia community, leading to the formation of various factions, including the Nizari Ismaili faction. [3] The Nizari Ismailis, led by the line of Imams from Isma'il ibn Jafar, played a significant role in the Fatimid Caliphate, a Shia Muslim dynasty that influenced the doctrinal and cultural aspects of Ismailism, particularly during the medieval period in North Africa. This paper will explore a comparative analysis of the beliefs and practices within the context of Ahle Sunnah Wal-Jama'a.

Doctrines and Practices

Nizar Ismailis believe in the concept of Imamate, which means that they follow a living, hereditary Imam who is their spiritual leader and guide. The Imam is considered to be the divinely appointed authority and the source of spiritual guidance for the community.[4]

The Nizari Ismailis follow unique rituals, including supplicatory and intercessory prayers (duʿa), contemplative sessions of remembrance (dhikr), and the chanting of devotional poetry known as Ginan. Renowned for their allegorical interpretation of the Quran, they assert that the Quran harbors concealed, esoteric meanings accessible only through the Imam's guidance. This interpretative method is commonly termed Ta'wil.[5] Ta'wil originated from the foundational teachings of the Quran and garnered the interest of numerous Muslim intellectuals. Meanwhile, Ismaili scholars who personally embraced ta'wil expounded on it in a more intricate and comprehensive manner. The interpretation of the Quran takes on a renewed significance in each era, guided by the respective Nizari Imam. They uphold the religious

[3] Andani, K. (2016a). A survey of Ismaili studies Part 1. *Religion Compass, 10*(8), 191–206

[4] "The Ismailis: Their History and Doctrines" 2nd Edition, by Farhad Daftary.

[5] The Ismailis: Their History and Doctrines" ,2nd Edition, by Farhad Daftary.

principle that allegiance to God and the Prophet precedes allegiance to the Imams. This viewpoint is rooted in the Quranic directive for Muslims to submit to God, the Prophet, and those in positions of authority. In moments of uncertainty about the correct path to take, they are to defer to the judgement of the Imam. The Imams are recognized as the People of Remembrance (Ahl al-Dhikr), possessing the proficient knowledge of the revealed message.

At the basis of Ismaili thought lies the distinction between the Zahir (outer, exoteric) and the Batin (inner, esoteric) elements of divine revelations and prophetic guidance. Whereas both the exoteric and esoteric readings were valid, the latter provided for an understanding of eternal truth (Haqq). It was present in the Qur'anic revelation but was veiled by exoteric readings that were comprehensible to the common believer. The inner truth could be unveiled through Batin readings enabled by ta ‘wil which only Ismaili Imams were able to conduct. Their adherents could, therefore, gain access to the eternal truths that lay behind divine revelations. Critics of the movement saw their Batin affinity as a disdain for exoteric aspects of Islam like the shari’a. Consequently, Ismailis were cast as heretics and persecuted. To this day they generally keep their esoteric doctrines and religious ceremonies private even when they are not living in concealment.[6]

Claiming that the essence of religious truth resides in its hidden or inner state, accessible only through the guidance of the hereditary Imam, Ismaili authors have consistently participated in esoteric explorations of Islamic doctrine. Detractors, opposing these beliefs, argue that they diverge from traditional Islam and have criticized the group for such deviations.

This branch of Shi’a find affirmation for this belief in the Qur ’anic verse;

وَٱعْتَصِمُواْ بِحَبْلِ ٱللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرَّقُوا

“And hold fast, all of you together, to the rope of Allah and do not separate”[7]

The rope (habl) of Allah is viewed as symbolizing the lineage of Imams. Confirmation of Imams ’unique ability to conduct esoteric (Batin) interpretation is seen in the verse[8]

[6]A modern history of the Ismailis. London: Tauris, P.95–128

[7] Quran 3:103

[8] Quran 3:7

"وَمَا يَعْلَمُ تَأْوِيلَهُۥٓ إِلَّا ٱللَّهُ ۘ وَٱلرَّٰسِخُونَ فِى ٱلْعِلْمِ يَقُولُونَ ءَامَنَّا بِهِۦ ۙ كُلٌّ مِّنْ عِندِ رَبِّنَا ۗ وَمَا يَذَّكَّرُ إِلَّآ أُو۟لُوا۟ ٱلْأَلْبَٰبِ"

"but none grasps their ʿfullʾ meaning [the Qur'an's] esoteric interpretation (tawil) except Allah. As for those well-grounded in knowledge (those who are of sound instruction)".

"Those who are of sound instruction" is read as referring to Imams. Whereas the Quranic revelation denotes the descent of the divine message to humanity, the Imam guides his followers through the ta'wil of this message to attain spiritual ascent by comprehending its originary meanings that exist only as Batin truth.

Their unique method of Quran interpretation, which highlights the significance of Ta'wil, involves deciphering the hidden or esoteric meanings of the Quran with the direction of an Imam. They regard the Imam as the spiritual and intellectual leader of their community. The esoteric (Batin) teachings of the Quran are restricted to initiates of the Ismaili traditions and are not accessible to the public. This leads to a relevant question: Was their perspective shaped through an academic understanding of the Qur'an and Sunnah?

On the contrary, Ahle sunnah wal jama'ah rejects the idea of hidden or esoteric meanings in the Quran as they emphasize the clarity (Mubeen) and accessibility of the Quran's message to all Muslims. The Quran is generally regarded as a clear and straightforward book, and accessible to all people, that conveys the message of God to humanity, regardless of their level of spiritual or intellectual attainment. Sunni scholars acknowledge that there may be layers of meaning and depth in the Quran, but they believe that the primary message of the Quran is accessible to anyone who seeks to understand it through the guidance of teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and consider his companions (Sahaba) as important sources of guidance. When it comes to interpreting the Quran, Sunni Muslims rely on traditional methods of exegesis (Tafsir), which involve the study of the Quranic text in its historical and linguistic context. Sunni scholars and theologians have developed various methodologies for understanding the Quran, including linguistic analysis, historical context, and jurisprudential principles.

One of the verses that highlights the clarity and guidance of the Quran is in Verse [9]

[9]Quran 39:23

"ٱللَّهُ نَزَّلَ أَحۡسَنَ ٱلۡحَدِيثِ كِتَٰبٗا مُّتَشَٰبِهٗا مَّثَانِيَ تَقۡشَعِرُّ مِنۡهُ جُلُودُ ٱلَّذِينَ يَخۡشَوۡنَ رَبَّهُمۡ ثُمَّ تَلِينُ جُلُودُهُمۡ وَقُلُوبُهُمۡ إِلَىٰ ذِكۡرِ ٱللَّهِۚ ذَٰلِكَ هُدَى ٱللَّهِ يَهۡدِي بِهِۦ مَن يَشَآءُۚ وَمَن يُضۡلِلِ ٱللَّهُ فَمَا لَهُۥ مِنۡ هَاد "

"Allah has sent down the best statement: a consistent Book wherein is reiteration. The skins shiver therefrom of those who fear their Lord; then their skins and their hearts relax at the remembrance of Allah. That is the guidance of Allah by which He guides whom He wills. And one whom Allah leaves astray - for him there is no guide."

This verse underlines the clarity and consistency of the Quran as a source of guidance for those who fear and remember Allah, while also pointing out that those whom Allah leaves astray and have no guide.

In Surah Al-Nahl Allah says:

وَنَزَّلۡنَا عَلَيۡكَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ تِبۡيَٰنٗا لِّكُلِّ شَيۡءٖ وَهُدٗى وَرَحۡمَةٗ وَبُشۡرَىٰ لِلۡمُسۡلِمِينَ

"And We have sent down to you the Book as clarification for all things and as guidance and mercy and good tidings for the Muslims."[10]

This verse highlights the clarity of the Quran and its guidance, saying that We (Allah) have revealed to you (Prophet Muhammad) the Book as a clear explanation for everything. In another place Allah says;

Ḥâ-Mĩm. By the clear Book! [11]

حمٓ وَٱلۡكِتَٰبِ ٱلۡمُبِينِ

These are the verses of the clear Book. [12]

تِلۡكَ ءَايَٰتُ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ ٱلۡمُبِينِ

"Mubeen" or clarity is a characteristic of the Quran, emphasizing its clear and understandable nature, which serves as a source of guidance and wisdom for Muslims.

Allah says: *"Alif, Lam, Ra. These are the verses of the clear Book"*. [13]

These verses mention that the Quran is a clear book that We (Allah) have sent down to you (Prophet Muhammad) so that you may bring mankind out of darkness into light.

Further support for this belief is drawn from the saying (hadith) of the Prophet:

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[10] Quran 16:89
[11] Quran 43:1-2
[12] Quran 28:1-2
[13] Quran 12:1-2

"I am the city of knowledge and Ali is its gateway; so, let whoever wants knowledge to enter through its gate".[14]

Sunni scholars hold varying opinions regarding the authenticity of the given hadith, with some suggesting potential fabrication. The reliability of a hadith undergoes a meticulous verification process, involving scrutiny of both its chain of narrators (isnad) and content (matn). Consequently, scholars have raised concerns about the credibility of the chain of narrators and its compliance with authenticity criteria. The most prominent characteristic of Ahle sunnah wal jama'ah is adherence to the way of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) in 'Aqedah (belief), 'Ibadah (worship), manners and attitude, and dealings with others.

The verse[15]

الٓر ۚ كِتَٰبٌ أَنزَلۡنَٰهُ إِلَيۡكَ لِتُخۡرِجَ ٱلنَّاسَ مِنَ ٱلظُّلُمَٰتِ إِلَى ٱلنُّورِ بِإِذۡنِ رَبِّهِمۡ إِلَىٰ صِرَٰطِ ٱلۡعَزِيزِ ٱلۡحَمِيدِ

of Surah Ibrahim refers to the *Quran as a Book revealed to the Prophet Muhammad to guide mankind from darkness to light, by permission of Allah.*

Sunni Islam regards the caliphate as primarily a temporal position, with the caliph chosen based on competence and piety within the Muslim community. The main purpose is to establish a central political authority for implementing sharia (Qur'anic Law). The caliph does not possess unique spiritual powers that set him apart from other believers; he cannot adjudicate or settle matters of faith or doctrine. Such issues are determined by recognized Jurists and legitimized through the consensus (ijma)[16] of the community. Therefore, the Caliph primarily serves as a political and legal executive, with the chief responsibility being the defense of the faith and the faithful. It was narrated from 'Abd-Allah ibn Maso'd (may Allah be pleased with him) that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: *"The best of the people are my generation, then those who come after them, then those who come after them."* [17]

The relevance of the Qur'an in contemporary world

The idea that the Qur'an has become obsolete has taken root among the Isma'ilis, implying that it is no longer considered a pertinent source of guidance in the modern era. Whereas we see that Qur'an being an ultimate

[14] Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani. London: Tauris. (Walker 1999, p.106)

[15] Quran (14:1)

[16] In early Islam 'ijma' were the companions of the Prophet. Later they were the companions of the companions; sometimes they were the people of Medina

[17] Narrated by al-Bukhari (2652) and Muslim (2533).

source of Islamic wisdom, is considered the base of every rule and regulation for present time and the time which has yet to come. The Qur'an issues a formidable challenge to anyone, regardless of the time, urging them to create a work superior to itself. This challenge is particularly significant for those who question the Qur'an's relevance or authenticity. The Qur'an specifically challenges contemporary linguists to craft something comparable in style, eloquence, and meaning within the Arabic language.

وَإِن كُنتُمْ فِي رَيْبٍ مِّمَّا نَزَّلْنَا عَلَىٰ عَبْدِنَا فَأْتُوا بِسُورَةٍ مِّن مِّثْلِهِ ۖ وَادْعُوا شُهَدَاءَكُم مِّن دُونِ اللَّهِ إِن كُنتُمْ صَادِقِينَ

"And if you are in doubt as to what We have revealed from time to time to Our servant, then produce a surah like it; and call your witnesses or helpers (If there are any) besides God, if you are truthful." [18]

Beyond its content preservation, the Qur'an stands out for having its modes of recitation meticulously maintained, with millions committing it to memory It addresses numerous contemporary societal issues, such as gambling, alcohol consumption (which can result in fatal accidents, date rape, and more), usurious lending practices (akin to modern-day slavery and a source of significant suffering due to the inability to repay debts, perpetuating generational debt), promiscuity, inequality, and suicide. Additionally, it delves into emotional afflictions like greed, envy, malevolent thoughts, distress, sadness, hopelessness, loneliness, backbiting, arrogance, and spying on one another. It's important to note that these concerns are examined at their foundational origins, with profound insights into their harm.

The Qur'an's enduring relevance is evident in its ability to address contemporary society, addressing current societal challenges alongside the historical issues faced by the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him)1400 years ago. This encompassing scope includes guidance on matters like conduct during warfare, determining when to engage in conflict and when to refrain, the importance of safeguarding places of worship, including churches and synagogues, the rules regarding the distribution of war spoils, and it also delves into family dynamics, covering aspects of marriage, divorce, the responsibilities of both parties during and after divorce, and the principles of inheritance allocation upon an

[18] Qur'an 2:23

individual's passing. The extensive list persists, presenting a contemporary challenge in daily life. As non-Muslims like George Bernard Shaw[19] have said, *"if the last Messenger, the walking Qur'an, were alive today he will solve the world's issue over a cup of tea*."

Allah says in the Quran: [20]

وَيَوْمَ نَبْعَثُ فِي كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ شَهِيدًا عَلَيْهِم مِّنْ أَنفُسِهِمْ وَجِئْنَا بِكَ شَهِيدًا عَلَىٰ هَٰؤُلَاءِ وَنَزَّلْنَا عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ تِبْيَانًا لِّكُلِّ شَيْءٍ وَهُدًى وَرَحْمَةً وَبُشْرَىٰ لِلْمُسْلِمِينَ

And [mention] the Day when We will resurrect among every nation a witness over them from themselves. And We will bring you, [O Muhammad], as a witness over your nation. And We have sent down to you the Book as clarification for all things and as guidance and mercy and good tidings for the Muslims.

The verse indicates that people who are blind of the Qur'an and hearts locked no matter the evidence given to them.

وَلَقَدْ ذَرَأْنَا لِجَهَنَّمَ كَثِيرًا مِّنَ الْجِنِّ وَالْإِنسِ لَهُمْ قُلُوبٌ لَّا يَفْقَهُونَ بِهَا وَلَهُمْ أَعْيُنٌ لَّا يُبْصِرُونَ بِهَا وَلَهُمْ آذَانٌ لَّا يَسْمَعُونَ بِهَا أُولَٰئِكَ كَالْأَنْعَامِ بَلْ هُمْ أَضَلُّ أُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْغَافِلُونَ"

"And We have certainly created for Hell many of the jinn and mankind. They have hearts with which they do not understand, they have eyes with which they do not see, and they have ears with which they do not hear. Those are like livestock; rather, they are more astray. It is they who are heedless."[21]

Though certain teachings of Qur'an, such as those regarding slavery, may have become obsolete over time. The verses addressing the treatment of slaves, emphasizing equality, were applicable in the past when slavery was prevalent. However, with the disappearance of slavery in modern society, these teachings have become irrelevant. Despite this, the Qur'an remains as words of Allah and can be interpreted by knowledgeable individuals to derive laws or guidance for future events and situations. Therefore, it's important to recognize that the moral values and theology of Islam are not subject to change. The texts of the Qur'an revealed by Allah to the Prophet Muhammad, and to the Prophetic Sunnah which comprises the sayings and actions of the Prophet which explain and detail the guidance contained in the Qur'an and provide a practical application of the Qur'an's commandments, prohibitions, and permissions.[22]

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[19] An Irish Playwright, critic and political activist (d.1950)

[20] Qur'an 16:89

[21] Qur'an 7:179

[22] Muṣṭafá al-Zarqāʾ, *al-Madkhal al-Fiqhī al-ʿĀm*, Dar al-Qalam 2004, vol. 1, p. 153.

Ritual acts of worship

The Ismaili Imamate adopts an approach to interpreting Islam that maintains the consistency of fundamental concepts, while continuously reinterpreting religious forms to align with evolving requirements and circumstances. Consequently, the Imam specifies the precise forms of prayer, fasting, cleansing rituals, and invocation (dhikr) for Ismailis in each era. In contemporary times, Ismailis perform the tariqah ritual prayer known as the Dua, an Arabic prayer recited three times a day. It is worth noting that this practice deviates from the traditions outlined in the Quran and Sunnah. As Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said;

"Every newly invented thing is a bid 'ah (innovation), every bid 'ah is a going astray, and every going astray will be in the Fire." [23]

No adhan or wudu

The call for prayer (*adhan)* can never be heard from a Isma'ili Jamatkhana. The reason is simple: Ismailis do not recite the obligatory prayer *aṣ-ṣalah*- at all. Instead, Isma'ilis pray something called the Holy Du'a', twice a day – one in the morning and the later two combined in the evening after business hours – regardless of the sunrise and sunset timings. Allah makes mention in the Qur'an:

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓاْ إِذَا نُودِىَ لِلصَّلَوٰةِ مِن يَوْمِ ٱلْجُمُعَةِ فَٱسْعَوْاْ إِلَىٰ ذِكْرِ ٱللَّهِ وَذَرُواْ ٱلْبَيْعَ ۚ ذَٰلِكُمْ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ إِن كُنتُمْ تَعْلَمُون فَإِذَا قُضِيَتِ ٱلصَّلَوٰةُ فَٱنتَشِرُواْ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَٱبْتَغُواْ مِن فَضْلِ ٱللَّهِ وَٱذْكُرُواْ ٱللَّهَ كَثِيرًا لَّعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ

"O you who have faith! When the call is made for prayer on Friday, hurry toward the remembrance of God, and leave all business. That is better for you, should you know. And when the prayer is finished, disperse through the land and seek God's grace, and remember God greatly so that you may be felicitous." [24]

Ismailis also do not perform the obligatory ablution or wuḍu' before Holy Du'a', as they consider themselves esoteric or Baṭini Muslims who are

[23] Reported by al-Nisaa'i in al-Sunan
[24] Qur'an 62:9-10

absolved of all physical rituals – specially cleaning and fasting. Whereas Allah has commanded in the Qur'an[25]

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓاْ إِذَا قُمْتُمْ إِلَى ٱلصَّلَوٰةِ فَٱغْسِلُواْ وُجُوهَكُمْ وَأَيْدِيَكُمْ إِلَى ٱلْمَرَافِقِ وَٱمْسَحُواْ بِرُءُوسِكُمْ وَأَرْجُلَكُمْ إِلَى ٱلْكَعْبَيْنِ

O believers! When you rise up for prayer, wash your faces and your hands up to the elbows, wipe your heads, and wash your feet to the ankles.

No Facing Qibla

Ismailis subscribe to the belief that "Allah is present everywhere" and hence argue that one does not have to face a particular direction when praying. Whereas it is a clear command given to Prophet to face towards Bait-u-Allah (Ka'baa) in the verse below:

قَدْ نَرَىٰ تَقَلُّبَ وَجْهِكَ فِي ٱلسَّمَآءِ ۖ فَلَنُوَلِّيَنَّكَ قِبْلَةً تَرْضَىٰهَا ۚ فَوَلِّ وَجْهَكَ شَطْرَ ٱلْمَسْجِدِ ٱلْحَرَامِ ۚ وَحَيْثُ مَا كُنتُمْ فَوَلُّواْ وُجُوهَكُمْ شَطْرَهُۥ ۗ وَإِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُواْ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ لَيَعْلَمُونَ أَنَّهُ ٱلْحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّهِمْ ۗ وَمَا ٱللَّهُ بِغَٰفِلٍ عَمَّا يَعْمَلُونَ

"Indeed, We see you ˹O Prophet˺ turning your face towards heaven. Now We will make you turn towards a direction ˹of prayer˺ that will please you. So, turn your face towards the Sacred Mosque ˹in Mecca˺—wherever you are, turn your faces towards it. Those who were given the Scripture certainly know this to be the truth from their Lord. And Allah is never unaware of what they do[26].

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ ٱرْكَعُواْ وَٱسْجُدُواْ وَٱعْبُدُواْ رَبَّكُمْ وَٱفْعَلُواْ ٱلْخَيْرَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ

"O believers! Bow down, prostrate yourselves, worship your Lord, and do ˹what is˺ good so that you may be successful."[27]

On the contrary, Ismailis reject all evidence from the Qur'an and hadith, opting instead to perform their prayers in a cross-legged position from the beginning to the end. Their "Holy Du'a" lacks any instances of qiyam or rukuʿ, and this specific method has been directly prescribed by Aga Khan, with strict adherence among followers. When it comes to standing shoulder

[25] Qur'an 5:6
[26] Qur'an, 2:144
[27] Qur'an 22:77

to shoulder with the rest of the ummah for Salat, they part company and sit down in a secluded quarter and recite their own supererogatory prayer.

Zakah (purification of wealth)

Ismaili Muslims typically offer zakat equal to 10% or 12.5% of their net income, which they refer to as "Dasond," (meaning one-tenth), and this contribution is presented to the Imam of the Time. The Imam accepts Dasond from the murids and grants them forgiveness for their sins. [28]

This idea goes beyond the traditional Zakah and is regarded as a religious obligation specific to the Ismaili community. The contributions gathered through Dasond are allocated to support the endeavors and institutions of the Ismaili Imamate, serve the community, and address broader humanitarian causes. Dasond is viewed as an expression of spiritual devotion and a way to seek the Imam's guidance and blessings. In contrast, within Sunni Islam, Zakah is primarily considered a religious duty, forming one of the pillars of Islam, and a means of wealth purification. The Quran and Sunnah advocate the concept of Zakah to assist those in need, particularly the Poor and the needy.

As mentioned in the Quran:

إِنَّمَا ٱلصَّدَقَٰتُ لِلۡفُقَرَآءِ وَٱلۡمَسَٰكِينِ وَٱلۡعَٰمِلِينَ عَلَيۡهَا وَٱلۡمُؤَلَّفَةِ قُلُوبُهُمۡ وَفِي ٱلرِّقَابِ وَٱلۡغَٰرِمِينَ وَفِي سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ وَٱبۡنِ ٱلسَّبِيلِۖ فَرِيضَةٗ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ

Zakah expenditures are only for the poor and for the needy and for those employed to collect [zakah] and for bringing hearts together [for Islam] and for freeing captives [or slaves] and for those in debt and for the cause of Allah and for the [stranded] traveler – an obligation [imposed] by Allah. And Allah is Knowing and Wise. [29]

وَأَنَّ هَٰذَا صِرَٰطِي مُسۡتَقِيمٗا فَٱتَّبِعُوهُۖ وَلَا تَتَّبِعُواْ ٱلسُّبُلَ فَتَفَرَّقَ بِكُمۡ عَن سَبِيلِهِۦۚ ذَٰلِكُمۡ وَصَّىٰكُم بِهِۦ لَعَلَّكُمۡ تَتَّقُونَ

Indeed, that is My Path—perfectly straight. So, follow it and do not follow other ways, for they will lead you away from His Way. This is what He has commanded you, so perhaps you will be conscious of Allah." [30]

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[28] Ismaili Gnosis, Faith (*iman*) remains secure through giving *dasond* (KIM, No. 125, Nairobi, October 6, 1905).

[29] Quran 9:60

[30] Quran 6:153

In Chapter 26 of Qur'an, Allah (SWT) has warned those who engaged in disobedient acts against Him, violated His sacred boundaries, and denied His Messengers along with the truthful messages they conveyed, will eventually face the consequences. They will be questioned about the idols they used to worship alongside Allah, realizing that these entities cannot aid them or even help themselves. Their loss and scandal will become obvious, and their regret will become clear, for their efforts will be wasted. They will claim to their false Gods that we were clearly misled when they considered them equivalent to the Lord of the worlds in matters of worship, affection, fear, and hope. They will acknowledge their previous misguided belief when it becomes evident to them on the day of judgment.[31] As the verse says:

"Then they will be toppled into it, together with the seducers, and the soldiers of Satan, all of them. They will say, as they feud in it. "By ALLAH!! We were in evident error, for equating you with the LORD of the Worlds. No one misled us except the sinners. Now we have no intercessors. And no sincere friend." [32]

Another place in Quran, [33]Allah highlights the concept of misguided efforts and deeds by saying:

قُلْ هَلْ نُنَبِّئُكُم بِٱلْأَخْسَرِينَ أَعْمَٰلًا ٱلَّذِينَ ضَلَّ سَعْيُهُمْ فِى ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا وَهُمْ يَحْسَبُونَ أَنَّهُمْ يُحْسِنُونَ صُنْعًا

"*Say, ˹O Prophet,˺ "Shall we inform you of who will be the biggest losers of deeds? ˹They are˺ those whose efforts are in vain in this worldly life, while they think they are doing good!"*.

Similar concept we find in the hadith of Aysha (May Allah be pleased with her) where the Prophet (peace be upon him) says: *"Whoever innovates into this matter of ours that which does not belong to it, it will be rejected."* [34]

This above verse and hadith are a reminder that sincerity and adherence to Allah's guidance are essential in determining the true value of one's deeds. It warns against self-deception and emphasizes the importance of aligning one's actions with the principles and values prescribed in the Quran. The

[31] Tafsir As-Sa'di
[32] Quran 26:94 to 101
[33] Quran 18:103-104
[34] Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 2697, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 1718

verse encourages reflection on the true nature and purpose of one's actions, underscoring the significance of seeking God's pleasure rather than pursuing deeds that may seem virtuous to individuals but fall short of divine standards.

Perspective of Ahle Sunnah Wal-Jama'ah

Islam means submitting to the way of God and striving to do that which God has asked of us. That necessarily entails following the guidance that God has revealed, which is found within the two foundational sources of Islamic teachings—the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (his Sunnah) [35]. The hadith, often referred to as the 73 sect's hadith, predicts the division of the Islamic community into 73 sects, with only one being destined for salvation. This narrative has significantly shaped Islamic ideology, influencing the perspectives of followers toward those of different sects and guiding the dynamics of their relationships. The most common version of the hadith is as follows;

"Jews were divided into 71 sects. One of them is in Heaven, seventy of them are in Hell. Christians are split into 72 sects. Seventy-one of them are in Hell, the one is in Heaven. I swear to Allah whose mighty hands hold Muhammad's will, beyond any doubt, my ummah will be divided into 73 sects. One will be in Heaven, seventy-two will be in flames. Said: 'Oh the Messenger of Allah! Who are they?' Thus, he spoke: 'They are al-jamā'a (the community)'. [36]

In another narration, the saved sect is expressed as "The one on which path I and my companions are on." [37]

In other narration, it was narrated on the authority of Abu Najih al-Irbad bin Sariyah (may Allah be pleased with him) who said:

"The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) delivered an admonition that made our hearts fearful and our eyes tearful. We said, "O Messenger of Allah, it is as if this were a farewell sermon, so advise us." He said, "I enjoin you to have Taqwa of Allah and that you listen and obey, even if a slave is made a ruler over you. He among you who lives long enough will see many differences. So, for you is to observe my Sunnah and the Sunnah of the rightly principled and rightly guided successors,

[35] Many Muslims are unaware that the Sunnah is divinely revealed guidance (Qur'an 53:3). See also 'Sunnah as revelation' in Hamdeh, Emad, Are Hadith Necessary? Yaqeen Institute, https://yaqeeninstitute.org/emadhamdeh/are-hadith-necessary

[36] Ibn Majah 3992, Book 36, Hadith 67, Vol. 5, Book 36, Hadith 3992

[37] Hasan, by Al-Tirmidhi (2641) "Iman" 18.

holding on to them with your molar teeth. Beware of newly introduced matters, for every innovation (bid'ah) is an error." [38]

The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) informed his companions of that which was to occur after him of differences and the spreading of evil. Not only did he warn them about these evils, but he also gave them advice on how to face them. Following the Sunnah of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) is the key to facing all evils. When the prophet says follow my Sunnah, he is saying follow my way, and his way is how the Qur'an should be applied in real life. The hadith (73 sects) continues to describe that all these sects will be in Hell except for one, which is often referred to as the "saved sect" or "the saved group."

This hadith is seen as a prophetic warning about the potential for divisions and disagreements within the Muslim community. It is often interpreted as a reminder to seek unity and adhere to the core principles of Islam, despite the differences that might arise.

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Tamiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said: "The sign of the people of bid'ah is that they do not follow the Salaf." [39]

Thus, we may conclude from the above two ahadith under Ibn Tamiyah's statement: The sign of these groups – i.e., the seventy-two groups that go against Ahl al-Sunnah Al-Jamaah – is that they forsake the Quran, Sunnah and scholarly consensus. The one who follows the Quran, Sunnah and scholarly consensus is Ahl al-Sunnah Al-Jamaah. [40] Therefore, we may draw close to Ibn Tamiyah's position, where he mentions that the saved group is described as Ahl al-Sunnah Al-Jamaah, and they are the greater majority and the vast multitude. In contrast, other groups align with unconventional concepts, division, innovation, and personal inclinations, whims and desires. None of these groups come close to the scale of the safeguarded group, and some are notably small, let alone comparable in magnitude.

From the given hadith, where the Prophet (may Allah be pleased with him) has emphasized on holding onto molar teeth, one may think, or the devil may attempt to deceive you by suggesting that engaging in Taqlid (blind imitation) is impermissible. It's crucial to recognize that succumbing to such whispers marks the initial step toward straying from the righteous path. Allah has instructed ordinary Muslims to seek guidance from scholars and adhere to their opinions and fatwas. It is known that those closest to the

[38] Abu Dawud & Al-Tirmidhi, who says it is an authentic hadith - Hasan saheeh. Hadith 28, 40 Hadith an-Nawawi

[39] Ibn Tamiyah ,Majmoo' al-Fataawa (4/155)

[40] Ibn Taymiyyah, Majmoo' al-Fataawa, vol. 3, p. 346.

correct path and truth are those who emulate the understanding of the Qur'an and Sunnah by the Prophet's Companions (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). These individuals are the followers of the righteous Salaf. Allah tells us that those who divide their religion and break up into sects, Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) has nothing to do with them. Allah says:

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ فَرَّقُواْ دِينَهُمۡ وَكَانُواْ شِيَعٗا لَّسۡتَ مِنۡهُمۡ فِي شَيۡءٍۚ إِنَّمَآ أَمۡرُهُمۡ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ ثُمَّ يُنَبِّئُهُم بِمَا كَانُواْ يَفۡعَلُونَ

"Indeed, you ˹O Prophet˺ are not responsible whatsoever for those who have divided their faith and split into sects. Their judgment rests only with Allah. And He will inform them of what they used to do." [41]

In another verse, He forbade them to differ and be divided by saying;

شَرَعَ لَكُم مِّنَ ٱلدِّينِ مَا وَصَّىٰ بِهِۦ نُوحٗا وَٱلَّذِيٓ أَوۡحَيۡنَآ إِلَيۡكَ وَمَا وَصَّيۡنَا بِهِۦٓ إِبۡرَٰهِيمَ وَمُوسَىٰ وَعِيسَىٰٓۖ أَنۡ أَقِيمُواْ ٱلدِّينَ وَلَا تَتَفَرَّقُواْ فِيهِۚ كَبُرَ عَلَى ٱلۡمُشۡرِكِينَ مَا تَدۡعُوهُمۡ إِلَيۡهِۚ ٱللَّهُ يَجۡتَبِيٓ إِلَيۡهِ مَن يَشَآءُ وَيَهۡدِيٓ إِلَيۡهِ مَن يُنِيبُ

"He (Allah) has ordained for you the same religion (Islamic Monotheism) which He ordained for Nooh (Noah), and that which We have revealed to you (O Muhammad), and that which We ordained for Ibraaheem (Abraham), Moosa (Moses) and 'Eesa (Jesus) saying you should establish religion (i.e. to do what it orders you to do practically) and make no divisions in it (religion) (i.e. various sects in religion)" [42]

It was narrated from 'Abd-Allah ibn Masood (may Allah be pleased with him) that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said:

"*The best of the people are my generation, then those who come after them, then those who come after them."* [43]

Like how one would refuse surgery from an unqualified individual, a knowledgeable practitioner of Islam must adhere to the commands and guidelines provided by God. Their actions should mirror the sunnah and be in accordance with genuine credibility and sufficient knowledge.

So, the best of guidance is the guidance of Muhammad and the people with the most knowledge (companions). As mentioned by Prophet of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him*); The Sahaabah are the best humans*

[41] Quran 6:159

[42] Quran 42:13

[43] Narrated by al-Bukhari 3649, Book 62, Hadith 1, Vol. 5, Book 57, Hadith 1 and Muslim (2533).

after the prophets. [44] He highlighted the importance and significance of the Sahabah by mentioning that "*Fear God in every matter concerning my Companions. Do not make them the targets [of your criticism] after me. Whoever loves them does so on account of their love for me, and whoever shows enmity towards them does so on account of their being hateful to me. Whoever insults them has insulted me and whoever insults me has insulted God. Whoever insults God, will soon be seized by Him."*[45]

Strengthening the position of the Prophet, Allah states in the Quran*:* [46]

"And whoever defies the Messenger after guidance has become clear to them and follows a path other than that of the believers, We will let them pursue what they have chosen, then burn them in Hell—what an evil end!"

"Say: 'Obey Allah and obey the Messenger.' If they turn away from this then know that Allah does not love those who refuse to obey Him and His Messenger." [47]

Conclusion

Allah has not abandoned humanity in a state of confusion, incapable of distinguishing between truth and falsehood. On the contrary, Allah has given clear signals to recognize sincerity and truth. He has provided compelling evidence for the right path, and those who deviate from it face severe consequences. The Quran does not mention a living Imam for guidance; instead, it emphasizes itself as the ultimate source of guidance. Therefore, we must not be deceived by the idea of a 'living Imam.' Instead, we should place our trust in Allah's words, which offer unwavering guidance in the Quran, free from any possibility of misguidance. This is a divine mercy and an opportunity for us to worship Allah by using the intellect He has granted us.

Muslims need to acknowledge that these sects and misguided factions were established with the primary intention of leading people away from the path of Allah. Those who deviate from the Right path have misled others by selectively quoting verses or hadiths, creating a false impression of adherence to the Qur'an and Sunnah. However, they are unable to provide evidence that their interpretation aligns with the understanding of the Sahaabah (may Allah be pleased with them). Instead of blindly following

[44] Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Musnad Aḥmad, Sharḥ Al-Sunnah
[45] J ami` at-Tirmidhi 3862, Book 49, Hadith 262, Vol. 1, Book 46, Hadith 3862
[46] Quran 4:115
[47] Quran(3:32

any group or leaders, Muslims should prioritize seeking knowledge, studying the Quran, Hadith, and the works of classical scholars who upheld this tradition. They should evaluate information critically to make informed decisions about their faith. The Quran, regarded as the ultimate source of Islamic wisdom, it is considered as the foundation for all contemporary and future rules and regulations. Its importance in the lives of believers lies in its role as the paramount source of divine wisdom, providing a pathway to draw nearer to Allah. Serving as a source of clarity, guidance, and mercy from Allah, the Quran illuminates the lives of those who steadfastly adhere to its teachings, presenting itself as the ultimate fountain of divine wisdom. In the Quran, Allah SWT strongly emphasizes the necessity of 'following the Prophet' (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) and indicates that whoever believes in a prophet is bound to follow him. It emphasizes that defying Allah and His Messenger signifies a refusal of divine guidance, implying that those who reject the message of Islam conveyed by Prophet Muhammad are not in harmony with God's love and approval.