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"Between Metaphor and Context: The Nature of the Fatimid Ismaili Discourse on Justice and Injustice"

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Abstract

In this article, the author explores three interrelated topics to elucidate the nature of Fatimid Ismaili discourse on justice and injustice in the larger context of Muslim medieval literature and expressions of law. First, the paradigm of *imama* is situated within the larger discussion of institutions of social justice in the Muslim world and articulated by the Fatimids through legal, doctrinal and philosophical writings. The paper then continues to explore how these writings, and their relationship to inherited notions of history, reflect the relationship between triumph and failure of a just polity. In conclusion, the paper analyses the interconnectedness of pluralist discourses of the period and attempts to elucidate a sense of the Fatimid Ismaili 'philosophy of history'.

Keywords

Justice, Fatimid, Injustice, Metaphor, Context, Imamat, Sunni, Shi'i, writing, thought, expression, Muslims, Islam, Ismaili Studies, Shi'i Studies, Islamic Studies, Law, Legal Studies, *'adl*, philosophy, history, literature, *fiqh*, *shari'a*, social order, Qur'an, *sunna*, *walaya*, *mahdi*, *haqa'iq*.

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Introduction

The discourse about war and justice, as Michael Walzer points out in his study, *Just and Unjust Wars*[1], tends very often to be projected in the language of law. This has particular significance in the case of medieval Islam, where juristic works, employing the language of *fiqh*, are the primary vehicles for dealing with issues pertaining to statecraft, war and the conduct of rulers. Gibb, among others, has argued that Sunni jurists, such as al-Mawardi, sought to rationalize historical processes, within the framework of the established body of law and thereby maintain, if not in fact, at least in theory, the primacy of the *shari'a*, in matters related to authority and administration in the state[2]. This point also serves to highlight the centrality that has generally been accorded to juristic works in scholarly discussion of the subject of justice. Such an emphasis discloses a definition of Muslim conceptions only in the terms of legal vocabulary and often ignores significances that a wider choice of sources might reveal.

In dealing with what has been termed the 'nature of Ismaili discourse,' I hope to suggest how one might examine different types of sources to focus on three interrelated topics. As Gibb has also suggested, the key concepts of *amir al-mu'minin* and that of the *imama*, are neither narrowly Sunni nor strictly Shi'i, for as he states, 'beneath the complex forms into which the simplest principle has been twisted to serve the ends of rival schools there is a common Islamic conviction that overrides all superficial differences of Creed'[3]. While accepting the fact that the paradigm of *imama* is a key element in the organisation of all medieval Muslim notions of social order and justice, the paper will explore as its first topic, how Ismaili thought defines this paradigm in relationship to the notions of justice and injustice and then suggest how assumptions implicit in various modes of writing — legal, doctrinal or philosophical — are employed to define the paradigm.

Fatimid writers, like their contemporary counterparts, inherited certain conceptions about ideal patterns of history, and how these might unfold in Muslim history, and thereby typify notions of justice. As its second topic, the paper examines how Ismaili writings reflect, through the prism of this received view of history, the relationship between triumph and failure of the just polity. In particular, I wish to focus on the analysis of descriptions of successes such as those of the Fatimid *da'i*, Abu 'Abd Allah al-Shi'i (d. 911) in the Maghreb and the particular connotations, attached in Ismaili works like the *Iftitah al-da'wa* to the perceived implementation of the ideals of justice mirrored in Ismaili efforts to establish their polity.

The third topic involves an analysis of the interrelatedness of what has been termed metaphor and context in Ismaili thought. The paper argues that in the Ismaili case, the 'language of the

[1] Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), xii-xiii.
[2] The point is made in an article 'Some Considerations on the Sunni Theory of the Caliphate,' reprinted in H.A.R. Gibb, *Studies on the Civilization of Islam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), pp. 141-150.
[3] *Ibid*, p. 149.

law' (*fiqh*) and the 'language of metaphor' (*haqa'iq*) cannot be treated as discrete spheres, with distinct and autonomous meanings and rules. This bifocal nature of Ismaili thought has often been considered problematic by historians of the movement. Rather, they should be viewed as a reflection of the plural modes of discourse that Ismaili thought employs and when taken together and studied in relationship to each other, they extend and enrich our knowledge of the whole. Ismaili historical and legal thinking is an extension and an elaboration of what might be termed its 'philosophy of history', that is, their commentary on the foundations of Islam and the activity by which those foundations are implemented in history. Such an analysis enables us to understand how absolute notions such as justice and injustice are challenged and defended in the context of moral and political life, and how models are created out of the chronicling of events through specific linguistic strategies.

The Paradigm of *Imama* and the Concept of a Just Order

In the section dealing with *jihad* in his work, *Da'a'im al-Islam*[4], al-Qadi al-Nu'man (d. 974), the Fatimid jurist and writer, defines *ulu'l-amr* (from the Qur'anic verse 4:59), as 'the *imam*s (of the House of the Prophet) to whom belongs *al-amr,* in its totality'. This well known Shi'i and Ismaili definition of *imama,* is of course an extension of his earlier exposition of the concept of *walaya*, implying both devotion and obedience to those *imam*s whom the Ismailis held to be the rightful leaders of the Muslim community. In attempting to establish the claims of 'Ali and the Ismaili *imama*, al-Nu'man goes on to discuss and refute the claims put forward by other groups from the *umma*[5].

If his discussion is seen in the context of juristic works on Islamic modes of governance such as those of al-Mawardi and Ibn al-Farra', to mention two subsequent writers, one can perceive the implications underlying his refutation of the basis of existing Muslim polities, such as those of the 'Abbasids. By attempting to undermine the legitimacy of such polities on the grounds of the Qur'an and *sunna*, al-Nu'man sought to vindicate the attempt of the Ismailis to displace them. If al-Mawardi and Ibn al-Farra''s works are to be understood against the perspective of Buwayhid threats to 'Abbasid sovereignty, then the work of al-Nu'man reflects the aspirations of the Fatimids to claim sovereignty and to justify such an attempt on the normative grounds, already established as the vocabulary of Muslim legal discourse. At this level, the paradigm of leadership and the role of the *imam* as the custodian of justice, thus find a common juristic mode of expression among Sunni as well as Shi'i writers.

Given that the *walaya* was divinely ordained and obligatory, a working theocratic principle and the *imam*'s functions in it however, needed to be worked out in the Ismaili context. Al-Kirmani (d. 1020), the philosopher and *da'i,* who lived during the reign of al-Hakim (966-1021), discusses the fusion of the philosophical basis of Ismailism with its juridical aspects[6].

[4] al-Qadi al-Nu'man, *Da'a'im al-Islam*, 2 Vols. (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1951-61), Vol. II, Book 7, Section 5.

[5] In this connection, see Azim Nanji, 'An Isma'ili Theory of *Walayah* in the *Da'a'im al-Islam* of Qadi al-Nu'man,' in *Essays on Islamic Civilization*, ed. D. P. Little (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976), pp. 260-273.

[6] al-Kirmani's *Rahat al-'aql*, ed. M. K. Husayn (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr al-'Arabi, 1952) and his unedited *al-Risala al-Wadiyya*, see the reference in S. N. Makarem, *The Doctrine of the Isma'ilis* (Beirut: Arab Institute for Research, 1972), p. 46.

For him, the essence of governing involves the organisation of human beings with all the variety of individual opinions and prejudices they represent into a divinely ordered pattern. If such a pattern were to become understood and then followed, society as a whole would reflect greater order and consequently greater happiness. The *imam*'s function according to al-Kirmani is to interpret the elements of the divine revelation so that each has its proper place within the integrity of the whole, assuming thereby that human beings and society will find proper equilibrium in both material and spiritual matters. Justice then comes to be conceived as this state of equilibrium, at the individual and societal levels. It flourishes best when the true *imam* holds both 'temporal' and 'spiritual' authority, since the ideal represents a fusion of individual goals of salvation with the collective goals of attaining the 'just' society.

In the juristic construction of al-Nu'man, as well as the philosophical exposition of al-Kirmani, a set of symbolic forms derived from the traditional idiom of Islamic sources, justifies the paradigm of the *imama* and links the achievements of justice in society with a focal role for the *imam* in the formation of a Muslim polity. It is this perception that provides the basis for an analysis of how the principles of justice and a 'new order' were to be implemented in the society that the Fatimids hoped to inaugurate in the Muslim world of the time.

The Establishment of the Just Society

The instrument by which the conditions of justice were to be implemented in society was the *da'wa*. Its aims were twofold: to establish itself in areas where support for the cause could be developed and to create through instruction and example model communities reflecting Islamic aspirations of justice. These goals incorporated a combination of military, political and educational efforts. In this way a confederation of such communities could be established, united by their belief and allegiance to the *imam* and the *da'wa* and a common set of values and institutions.

An excellent example of how such a community was formed and how it typified notions of a new and just society, is afforded by the success of the *da'i* Abu 'Abd Allah al-Shi'i among the Berbers of the Maghreb. In his *Iftitah al-da'wa*, the basic chronicle for the history of the rise of the Fatimid dynasty, al-Nu'man describes[7] the steps that al-Shi'i followed:

> 1) While undertaking the pilgrimage to Mecca, al-Shi'i established contacts with pilgrims of the Kutama, a Berber group, among whom some were known to be Shi'i supporters and established common ground with them in terms of loyalty to the *ahl al-bayt*.
>
> 2) He sought detailed information on conditions in the Maghreb and more particularly in their own area and in terms of the degree of autonomy and independence they exercised from existing Aghlabid control.

[7] al-Nu'man, *Risalat Iftitah al-Da'wa*, ed. W. al-Qadi (Beirut, 1979), particularly, pp. 59ff.

3) He accepted their invitation to come to their area as a religious instructor.

The subsequent process of instruction and organisation of the community also reveals a specific pattern:

1) His instruction in general was aimed at emphasising basic Shi‘i principles but emphasised the notion of the expected *mahdi*.

2) He redefined the identity and social structure of the Kutama by calling Ikjan, his headquarters, a *dar al-hijra*. He organised the Kutama into seven groups each with its own leader and enjoined strict adherence to the obligations of the *shari‘a*. Each member of the group referred to the other as ‘our brother’, and the community as a whole was to perceive itself as a community of believers (*mu’minin*) as against those who opposed it and who were classified as non-believers.

Thus there is a self-conscious reversion to the model of the Prophet and the early *umma*, which becomes the model pattern for the organisation of any just and moral order. Such an order, which conforms to a peaceful and idealised pattern of the *umma* founded and organised under the Prophet, a pattern that deliberately sets up contrasts between a pre-existing unjust order and the new set of values and institutions characterised by justice, prefigures what the Fatimids believed they wished to bring about in the Muslim world of the time. Such a vision, also presupposes challenge and opposition. Al-Nu‘man goes on to chronicle opposition from local chiefs and subsequently from the Aghlabid court. This caused al-Shi‘i to ‘migrate’ from Ikjan to Tazrut, which now became the new *dar al-hijra*.

Once al-Shi‘i had established his authority and created the necessary solidarity of purpose among members of the community, he undertook a series of campaigns, the legitimacy of which were defined in the context of the principle of *jihad*. The climax of these victorious advances was the defeat of the Aghlabid army and the conquest of Raqqada in 908. The name of the ‘Abbasid Caliph was dropped from the Friday *khutba*, new coins were struck and the nascent community awaited the arrival of the *mahdi*. But before that could happen, he had to be rescued from Sijilmasa, where he was being held prisoner. Al-Shi‘i sought to do this diplomatically and when rebuffed, attacked the city and finally vanquished it. The appearance of the *mahdi* as described by al-Nu‘man evokes all the emotions of expectation and triumph that the moment represented and echoes the prophecies recorded in traditions about the event, attributed to the Prophet[8]:

...the Mahdi shall be from the descendants of Fatima, the queen of all the women in the world. Whether it shall be long, or soon, yet he shall come, to fill the earth with equity and justice, even as it has been filled with injustice and oppression.

[8] See the tradition cited by Ivanow from Nu‘man, *Sharh al-akhbar* in *Ismaili Tradition Concerning the Rise of the Fatimids* (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), p. 115.

The first two levels of conceptualisation on 'justice and injustice' discussed above draw primarily upon juristic and historical material, of which the *Da'a'im* and the *Iftitah* are good examples. The mode of argumentation and explanation of the former derives from the vocabulary and methodology of *fiqh* while that of the former employs the structure and language of historical chronicles. Both construct, out of an existing and shared vocabulary, their particular version of a just Muslim order.

Haqa'iq

The third level of discourse is represented in Ismaili writings such as those of al-Kirmani, and is known as the *haqa'iq*. It is these works that employ what I have termed the language of metaphor. This type of metaphoric usage was criticised by the opponents of the movement as a contrived attempt to obscure meaning and given to unnecessary ornamentation of apparently simple ideas but as is well-known, functions in the overall Ismaili context as a very central tool of discourse, where the metaphor of the *haqa'iq* literature has the role defined by Jonathan Culler as the 'figure of figures, a figure for figurality'[9]. It has the capacity to provide highly significant transformations of thought and experience, which cannot be effected through the linguistic strategies of *fiqh* or *ta'rikh*, and is concerned to highlight both the plurality and ambiguity intrinsic to language.

For example, the two key metaphors in the discussion of the just society in Ismaili thought are those of the *mahdi* and the *qa'im*, where these two figures symbolise a metahistorical projection of Islamic history as conceived in terms of the larger design based on Divine Will and Purpose. History is symbolised as a cyclical process and two dominant patterns of this process are characterised in the two eras that unfold — the *dawr al-satr*, the period of concealment and incubation for the attainment of the just society, and the *dawr al-zuhur*, where the principles of justice are manifested in the institutions that uphold it. Thus in historical and human terms, society during these two eras reflects a model of history in which the tide of justice ebbs and rises through each phase of the cycle.

The metaphors that are the underpinning of this typological view of history, can be considered as elements that give a permanent imprint to Ismaili understanding of the sacredness of authority and to the view that even when the processes of history appear to inhibit the fulfillment of justice, the idioms inherent in these symbols retain their universality. The metaphors connect the social world, in this sense, with the cosmic, natural world and in the *haqiqi* view represent a quest for and the hope of attaining 'higher stages of perfection', which ultimately transcends a notion of justice, tied to mere historical time and space.

[9] Jonathan Cullter, 'The Turns of Metaphor' in *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 189.

Conclusion

While the present study is only a preliminary attempt to chart the overall discourse on justice and injustice, its primary purpose has been to establish that such a discourse can best be understood as part of the dialogical relationship that exists among plural modes of writing and thought in Islam, none of which ought to be regarded as exclusive or entirely normative. Ismaili legal and historical texts and esoteric writings provide commentaries on each other and through this complementary relationship, articulate those realities fundamental to an integrated religious vision of the meaning and possibility of justice, and the persistence of that ideal in an often ambiguous world.