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From Individual Awaiting to Social Duty: *Wilayat al-Faqih* in Mahdavi Society

***Wilayat al-Faqih* in Mahdavi Society: Unity, Awaiting, and the Advent of Imam Mahdi**

Imagine a caravan heading toward a distant and challenging destination. Each traveler may know the destination, desire to reach it, and even correctly identify parts of the route. However, if everyone moves according to their own personal interpretation, the caravan will lose its collective strength. In such a scenario, sharing a common destination does not guarantee arrival; in fact, conflicting paths might halt the journey altogether. Therefore, beyond a shared destination, the caravan requires a map, rules of movement, and a unified leadership that turns dispersed choices into coordinated action.

The society waiting for the Savior faces a similar challenge. Love for Imam Mahdi (Peace be upon him), having knowledge about his advent, and a desire to serve clarify the destination, but they do not show how individual and social capacities must be aligned along a shared path. If the concept of awaiting (*intizar*) is reduced merely to an internal emotion or isolated personal deeds, many well-intentioned individuals may end up choosing contradictory paths, ultimately eroding the collective potential of the society.

From this perspective, the fundamental question arises: During the period of Occultation, how must the Shia community bridge the gap between the absence of the Infallible Imam, the continuity of religious guidance, the imperative to implement social rulings, and the need for unity? The

relationship between awaiting and leadership during the Occultation shows that true awaiting has deep social dimensions. It demands *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), order, and organized governance to translate individual hope into collective historical action.

The Ontological Foundation of Religious Leadership during the Occultation

The discussion does not begin with the structure of government or political relations, but with the truth of the human being and the ultimate purpose of their journey. Human beings are not limited to material life and fleeting needs; we are on a journey toward eternity, and our potential is actualized only when our perceptions, choices, behaviors, and relationships align with the ultimate purpose of creation.

Within this framework, spiritual perfection is linked to obedience to a system that reveals what is spiritually beneficial (*maslahah*) or detrimental (*mafsadah*) along the path. The essence of the *Hadith Qudsi*, “My servant! Obey me, so that I make you like Myself,”¹ expresses this relationship: Nearness to God and the acquisition of divine attributes are achieved through obedience. Here, becoming like God does not imply likeness in essence (*dhat*), but rather the flourishing of the attributes of perfection within the limits of human existence. By aligning one's will with divine guidance, a person actualizes their existential capacities.

Accordingly, religious leadership during the Occultation is not a concept divorced from self-knowledge. If human beings are destined for eternity, and if our progress requires discerning true harm from benefit, then our collective life cannot be detached from this ultimate purpose. The very same individual who relies on divine guidance in prayer, fasting, transactions, and family affairs remains bound to the purpose of creation when making social decisions or facing public affairs.

As a result, religion must provide an integrated framework suited to both the individual and collective dimensions of human life.

***Fiqh*: The Bridge Between Human Purpose and the Order of Life**

Within this intellectual framework, *fiqh* is not merely a collection of isolated rules governing acts of worship. Rather, the fundamental role of *fiqh* is to structure a person's relationship with themselves, others, and the full spectrum of realities encountered along the journey of life. By identifying actions according to the five legal rulings in *fiqh*—obligatory (*wajib*), forbidden (*haram*), recommended (*mustahab*), discouraged (*makruh*), or permissible (*mubah*), *fiqh* clarifies how human deeds relate to one's ultimate destination. These rulings illustrate which behaviors are essential for spiritual advancement, which act as obstacles, and which facilitate or hinder progress to varying degrees.

The true subject of *fiqh* is the human being in motion; therefore, its rulings cannot be understood without considering the truth, circumstances, and ultimate purpose of the human being. Certain rulings are permanent, maintaining their core principle across varying circumstances. Others take different forms depending on individual traits, time, place, and social conditions. This change does not indicate instability in religious guidance; rather, it results from changes in the subjects and circumstances to which the rulings apply.

It is at this point that the relationship between awaiting Imam Mahdi (Peace be upon him) and religious leadership during the Occultation becomes clear in relation to *fiqh*. If awaiting means actively steering society toward an ideal state, this movement cannot occur without discerning what is genuinely beneficial or harmful. *Fiqh* provides the criteria for this journey, while a qualified *faqih* (Islamic jurist) bears the responsibility of interpreting and applying these criteria

to real-life situations. However, private matters and public affairs differ significantly in the scope of their impact, making a clear distinction between individual religious authority (individual *marja'iyah*) and societal leadership essential.

From Individual *Marja'iyah* to Religious Leadership during the Occultation

In personal matters such as prayer, fasting, ritual purification, and other individual obligations, a person may refer to their *marja' al-taqlid* (highest ranking Shia religious scholar). Having multiple *maraji'* within this sphere does not disrupt the social order, as the subject of the ruling is primarily an individual's personal conduct, with its direct effects confined to that private realm. Two individuals can easily follow different *fatwas* on the details of daily worship without undermining societal stability.

Public and political affairs, however, are inherently shared and collective. Decisions regarding war and peace, maintaining public order, managing national crises, and shaping the destiny of a society cannot be subjected to multiple, competing decision-makers. If every individual or faction attempts to translate their personal interpretation directly into public policy, society will inevitably dissolve into fragmentation and conflict. The core issue here is not whether one scholar possesses absolute intellectual superiority in every domain, but rather the absolute necessity for unity at the level of decision-making and execution.

In this light, *Wilayat al-Faqih* in Mahdavi society exists precisely to regulate these shared societal affairs. This role does not negate the *fiqh* of individual *marja'iyah* (authority) in private obligations; rather, it operates in a distinct domain. While a *marja'* clarifies rulings for individual conduct, *Wali al-Faqih* is responsible for rendering binding decisions on matters that require nationwide coordination. This distinction is essential for understanding the role of *Wilayat al-*

Faqih in Mahdavi society, where individual religious authority and societal leadership operate in distinct domains.

This distinction also brings clarity to the personal responsibility of the individual believer. In personal choices, everyone is obligated to seek out their specific religious rulings. However, the moment an action enters the realm of public interest, it can no longer be decided based on personal preference alone. Because collective actions carry wide-reaching consequences, they demand a corresponding level of responsibility—requiring individuals to integrate the authority of public decision-making into their own actions.

***Wilayat al-Faqih* in Mahdavi Society: Social Unity and Religious Leadership**

Within this framework, unity is not merely a moral recommendation to avoid dispute; it is a fundamental prerequisite for collective action. A society incapable of coordinating its public decisions inevitably consumes much of its energy in internal friction. In such a scenario, even if individuals act with the best of intentions, the ultimate outcome of their deeds may undermine the shared path. Therefore, an action cannot be evaluated solely by the actor's intention; its impact on social cohesion must also be weighed.

The Quranic verse, “persecution is severer than slaughter,”² speaks to the severe harm that persecution can inflict upon individual and collective life. According to this logic, the breakdown of social order and the emergence of conflicts that disrupt security, faith, and public progress can often cause far greater damage than a limited harm.

Having a centralized decision-making body does not mean that all scholarly, juristic, or expert opinions must homogenize. Diversity of thought can freely exist during the stages of analysis and

deliberation; however, when an issue demands joint action, persisting in disagreement at the level of execution destroys practical unity.

This priority placed on unity also explains why certain permissible actions may be temporarily set aside under specific circumstances, or why certain prohibitions might yield a different ruling in exceptional situations. The classic example of permitting a lie to reconcile two feuding parties (*islah dhat al-bayn*) shows that evaluating actions remains incomplete without considering their relationship to greater interests. Naturally, this principle does not give anyone permission to make up their own rules. If everyone changes the laws based on their personal ideas of unity or convenience, it will cause the very chaos and division meant to be avoided.

Awaiting Imam Mahdi and the Challenge of Social Coordination

Waiting for the Savior can be understood at three levels: understanding the destination, personal readiness, and active participation in collective movement. The first level involves *ma'rifa* about the Imam and his advent. The second level focuses on self-improvement and aligning one's character with the Advent. The third level organizes scattered talents and individual resources to remove obstacles and cultivate widespread societal readiness. Waiting for Imam Mahdi (Peace be upon him) reaches its true completion only when these three levels operate in continuity.

In this sense, *Wilayat al-Faqih* in Mahdavi society provides a framework for coordinating individual capacities with the collective movement toward the Advent.

If love for Imam Mahdi (Peace be upon him) is detached from practical discipline, it risks remaining a mere emotional sentiment. The authenticity of one's devotion is revealed when a person actively aligns their will with the requirements of the ultimate goal. Anyone who genuinely desires to serve cannot rely solely on personal enthusiasm to validate their methods. True service

requires not only a noble motive, but also a clear knowledge of the path, a careful assessment of outcomes, and alignment with others striving toward the same end.

To integrate this principle into daily life, an individual can reflect on three key questions prior to taking social action: Does this action align with my religious purpose? Will its outcomes strengthen or undermine collective unity? And is the chosen method in harmony with the broader direction of society? Asking these questions transforms the act of awaiting Imam Mahdi (Peace be upon him) from a passive belief into a concrete, practical standard for everyday action.

The Conceptual Scope of Deputyship and the Status of the *Faqih*

Analyzing the status of the *faqih* requires a clear distinction between the station of the Infallible Imam and the responsibilities of the *faqih*. The Imam possesses the station of infallibility and holds the unique position of Imamate, whereas the *faqih* assumes a specific responsibility during the period of Occultation. Therefore, deputyship (*niyabah*) does not signify total identity between the *faqih* and the Imam across all existential and *ma'rifa*-based levels. The core of this deputyship lies in managing public affairs and executing those functions that the religious community cannot afford to suspend during the Occultation.

On this basis, religious leadership during the Occultation reflects a social and juristic necessity, rather than the transfer of the station of infallibility. The legitimacy of this position depends on the *faqih*'s qualifications, ability to manage public affairs, and commitment to safeguarding the interests of society. In this framework, the term *Wilayat al-Mutlaqah* (Absolute Guardianship) refers to the comprehensive scope of responsibility in public affairs—meaning that societal governance cannot be restricted merely to a few isolated topics while major, evolving social issues are left without guidance.

This distinction safeguards against two errors: first, reducing the *faqih*'s role merely to answering individual queries; second, equating the *faqih* entirely with the Infallible Imam. According to Shia doctrine, the Infallible Imam is the pivot of creation and the conduit of divine grace. Furthermore, as the Islamic Republic of Iran is the world's sole Shia government whose ultimate goal is to prepare the ground for the advent of Imam Mahdi (Peace be upon him), it is entirely consistent with this belief system that the *Wali al-Faqih* in this structure receives the special guidance and protection of Imam Mahdi (Peace be upon him).

Conclusion: Awaiting Imam Mahdi and Religious Leadership during the Occultation

Human beings are destined for eternity. To achieve spiritual perfection, one must structure their behavior and relationships around what is genuinely beneficial or harmful. *Fiqh* serves as the regulating framework for this journey, linking both individual and societal dimensions of life to the ultimate purpose of creation. However, when the focus shifts from individual conduct to the public sphere, a multiplicity of decision-makers can lead to practical conflicts and weaken the social fabric. Consequently, unity at the levels of decision-making and execution becomes an absolute necessity.

The significance of *Wilayat al-Faqih* in Mahdavi society becomes clear within this context: Awaiting defines the direction of movement; *fiqh* reveals the governing rules; social unity enables collective action; the religious leader coordinates decisions and societal capacities along a shared path. Thus, the role of the *faqih* in public affairs must not be viewed as separate from Mahdawiyyah. Rather, it serves as the vital link connecting the ultimate ideal of the future with the present responsibilities of society.

In conclusion, responsible awaiting is fundamentally incompatible with self-centeredness. An individual waiting for the Savior cannot rely solely on the purity of their intentions; they must continuously evaluate how their actions relate to human destiny, juristic standards, societal unity, and the broader collective path. Devotion to the Advent achieves true coherence only when love, *ma'rifa*, individual practice, and social participation align seamlessly. In this way, the awaiting society ceases to be a mere collection of fragmented inclinations, transforming instead into an organized structure moving purposefully toward a singular destination.

References

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 2. Quran, 2:191