

# COMMANDING AND FORBIDDING THE *IMÂM*: A STUDY OF THE CONCEPT OF *AL-AMR BI AL-MA'RÛF* AND *AL-NAHY 'AN* *AL-MUNKAR* IN ISLAMIC IMAMSHIP

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## ABSTRACT

*The notion of commanding right and forbidding wrong is one of the notable values in Islam. This has been emphasized in verse 104 of surah Āli 'Imrān [3]: "Let there arise out of you a group of people inviting to all that is good, enjoining right and forbidding wrong". This article is about the imâm as an agent of forbidding wrong and as an agent of wrongdoing. It aims to make an important contribution to the study of administrative ethics in Islamic imamship. It explains how the imâm plays its role in the society as of commanding good and forbidding wrong. It also examines the wrongdoing of imams and the ethics of commanding and forbidding the imâm.*

**Keywords:** *Commanding right; forbidding wrong; imâm; administrative; ethics*

## INTRODUCTION

The words *al-amr bi al-ma'rûf* and *al-nahy 'an al-munkar*, *jihād* and *dakwah* found in classical literature are often used interchangeably. The duties of *al-amr bi al-ma'rûf* and *al-nahy 'an al-munkar* are prescribed upon Muslims in order to enjoin good and prevent wrong in the ummah. This sort of *jihād* is based on the following hadiths:

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*“If one of you sees something wrong, let him change (fal-yughayyirhu) it with his hand; and if he is not able to do so, then with his tongue; and if he is not able to do so, then with his heart and that is the weakest of faith.”<sup>1</sup>*

*“The Prophet said: “I was sent to perfect good character.”<sup>2</sup>*

*“The likeness of me and the other Messengers is like that of a man who built a house. He completed the building, except for a single stone, in the place of which there was a void. When people visited it they expressed their admiration of its beauty; but they used to say: “If only it were not for this empty space”. I am this completing stone.”<sup>3</sup>*

From the first hadith taken above, it can be seen that the Prophet has used the word “*taghyīr*” which means to change wrong into right. Also, the hadith shows that a Muslim must strive to avert injustice first by actions, and if that is not possible, by words, and if that is not possible, at least by intention. Therefore, it is generally accepted that the word *dakwah* includes *al-amr bi al-ma'rûf* and *al-nahy 'an al-munkar* because *al-amr bi al-ma'rûf* is a call or invitation to do good and to stick with it, while *al-nahy 'an al-munkar* is a call or invitation to keep away from evil, mischief, calamity and so on.

Islam has laid down some universal fundamental rights for humanity as a whole, which are to be observed and respected under all circumstances. To achieve these rights, Islam provides not only legal safeguards but also a very effective moral system. Thus whatever leads to the welfare of the individual or the society is morally good in Islam and whatever is injurious is morally bad. Islam attaches so much importance to the love of God and love of man that it warns against too much formalism.

Thus, by setting God's pleasure as the objective of man's life, Islam has furnished the highest possible standard of morality. This is bound to provide limitless avenues for the moral evolution of humanity. By making divine revelations as the primary source of knowledge, it gives permanence and stability to the moral standards, which afford reasonable scope for genuine adjustments, adaptations and innovations though not for unacceptable human desires, wild variation or moral fluidity. It provides a sanction to morality in the love and fear of God, which will encourage man to obey the moral law even without any external pressure.

<sup>1</sup> See *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 'Kitâb al-Imân', p. 380; see also, *Riyâḍ al-Sâlihîn* : p. 189.

<sup>2</sup> See *Musnad*, vol. 2, p. 381; *Muwattâ'*, 47/8.

<sup>3</sup> See *Musnad*, vol. 2, p. 244.

Islam widens the scope of man's individual and collective life – his domestic associations, his civic conduct, and his activities in the political, economic, legal, educational and social realms. Islam covers his life from home to society, from the wash room to the battle field, literally from the cradle to the grave, to be precise; no sphere of life is exempted from the universal and comprehensive application of the moral principles of Islam.

Islam, as explained elsewhere, invokes the people, to practice *akhlâq* (ethics, the science of virtue or adab),<sup>4</sup> but also to establish *akhlâq* and eradicate vice, to enjoin good and to forbid wrong (*al-amr bi al-ma'rûf* and *al-nahy 'an al-munkar*). Those who respond to this call are gathered together into a community and given the name *ummah* – that is – it should make an organized effort to establish and enforce good and eradicate wrong. Here, in this paper I furnish some discussion of *al-amr bi al-ma'rûf* and *al-nahy 'an al-munkar* with particular reference to the role of imams. This paper covers a preliminary discourse of the particular issue that is extracted from the broad spectrum of the Islamic imamship concept.

## Islamic Imamship

Another issue at stake here is the *imâmah* (imamship). It is worth noting that the idea of *imâmah* was formulated in classical Islamic thought by the jurists, as a result of their interpretation of Qur'anic texts that recommend Muslims to a duty of *al-amr bi al-ma'rûf* and *al-nahy 'an al-munkar*. The general concept of *imâmah* can be traced in the Qur'an, especially in this verse:

*“Thus We have appointed you a moderate nation (ummatan wasa'atan), that you may be witnesses over mankind (shuhadâ'a 'alâ al-nâs) and that the Messenger may be a witness over you.”*<sup>5</sup>

The phrase “*ummatan wasa'atan*”, if it is read in the context of the following phrase “*shuhadâ'a 'alâ al-nâs*”, shows to us that verse 143 refers to the meaning of an Islamic political system. In other words, it indicates the concept of the establishment of *imâmah*. Commentators, such as Abû Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarîr al-Ṭabarî (d. 310/923) and Maḥmûd b. 'Umar al-Khawârizmî al-Zamakhsharî (d. 538/1144) mention that the word “*ummatan wasa'atan*” refers to “*ummatan 'udûlan*” (community of justice) and “*ummatan khiyâran*” (chosen

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<sup>4</sup> For more detailed explanation of the terms, please see Nik Roskiman Abdul Samad (2003), *al-Ghazâlî on Administrative Ethics (with special reference to his Naṣîḥât al-Mulûk)*, Selangor : IIUM, p. 6-7.

<sup>5</sup> The *Qur'an*, al-Baqarah (2): 143.

community) respectively.<sup>6</sup> Aḥmad b. ‘Abd al-Halim Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 727/1328) explains that *ummatan wasaṭan* implies that the Muslim community is the most beneficial type of nation for all mankind. This can be observed by looking at the statement that Muslims are enjoined to perform *al-amr bi al-ma‘rūf* and *al-nahy ‘an al-munkar*.<sup>7</sup>

The phrase “*ummatan wasaṭan*” above also draws attention to the jurists’ discussion of the Islamic political framework. The first fundamental feature of the political framework is that Muslims must establish the *imâmah* to take care of their welfare, to maintain peace and order, to implement justice, to settle disputes, to protect the frontiers and to see to it that the dictates of Shari‘ah are duly implemented. As mentioned elsewhere, after the Muslims migrated to Medina, they constituted the ummah and established a political system.

In the early years of Medina, the Prophet took up the challenge and took adequate measures to protect the community and promote its well-being. Also, the Prophet himself implemented the concept of *imâmah*, which is vital for the community. The importance of establishing *imâmah* is indicated by the Qur’an:

“(And they are) those who, if We give them power in the land, establish prayer and give zakâh and enjoin the right and forbid the wrong. And to Allah rests belongs the outcome of (all) matters.”<sup>8</sup>

“O you who have believed! Obey Allah, and obey the Messenger and those of you who are in authority (*ulû al-amr*).”<sup>9</sup>

The command to obey those in political authority, as mentioned in this verse by the word “*ulû al-amr*” suggests the necessity, even the obligation of having the *imâm* to maintain peace and order, to settle disputes, to protect the frontiers and to see to it that shari‘ah is complied with. Commentators, such as Al-Ṭabarī and Al-Zamakhsharī maintain that the phrase “*ulû al-amr*” refers to “*umarā’*” [(rulers)].<sup>10</sup> Similarly, this concept is explained by the hadith:

“If you happen to be travelling as a group of three persons, make one of you the imam (*amīr*) over you.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Al-Ṭabarī (1984), *Jāmī‘ al-Bayân*, Vol. 3, Beirut, p. 141-45; Al-Zamakhsharī (n.d.), *al-Kashshâf*, Vol. 31, Beirut, p. 198.

<sup>7</sup> Aḥmad b. ‘Abd al-Ḥālīm Ibn Taymiyyah (1976), *al-Amr bi al-Ma‘rūf wa al-Nahy ‘an al-Munkar*, Beirut, p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> The *Qur’an*, al-Ḥājj (22): 41.

<sup>9</sup> The *Qur’an*, al-Nisā’ (4): 59.

<sup>10</sup> Al-Ṭabarī, *op.cit.*, 8:502-04; Al-Zamakhsharī, *op.cit.*, 1: 524.

<sup>11</sup> This hadith is taken from *Sunan Abû Dawûd*, 14: 2602.

The word “*amîr*” here means a person with “*imârah*” or “*imâm*”.<sup>12</sup> So, the greater the number of the group the greater the need for the *imâm* to take care of the interests of the group, and the more complicated the form of the power and its authorization. With regard to the *umarâh*, Ibn Taymiyyah says that the *imâm* must implement Shari’ah, perform *al-amr bi al-ma'rûf* and *al-nahy 'an al-munkar* and organize jihad to defend the survival of Islam.<sup>13</sup>

What is more, Ibn Taymiyyah thinks that the *imâmah* is a religious necessity as well as a political one. He gives two reasons for regarding the necessity of *imâmah*. First, he elaborates the above hadith: “*If you happen to be travelling as a group of three persons, make one of you the amîr over you*”. Quoting this hadith, Ibn Taymiyyah explains: “*If an imâm is considered necessary on a journey of three persons, it becomes more important in a group with a greater number of persons*”.<sup>14</sup> Second, he maintains that the duty of *al-amr bi al-ma'rûf* and *al-nahy 'an al-munkar*, establishing the prayers and *hudûd* cannot be discharged without the power of *imâmah*.<sup>15</sup> What is more, as Ibn Taymiyyah suggested, *imâmah* is a trust (*wakâlah*), like the responsibility of a shepherd to the flock. He quotes a hadith: “*All of you are shepherds, and every shepherd is responsible for his flock*”.<sup>16</sup> It is also worth mentioning that he agrees with the opinion that even unjust *imâms* are preferable to anarchy, although *imâms* commanding outright contraventions of God’s will must not be obeyed. Ibn Taymiyyah quotes one hadith: “*Sixty years domination by a despotic imâm is better than one single night without an imâm*”.<sup>17</sup>

Hence, I would rather say that the *imâmah* is a religious necessity, because without it one cannot realize the ideals of Islamic socio-political and economic justice. Furthermore, none of mankind can attain to complete welfare, whether in this world or in the next, except by association, cooperation and mutual aid. Their cooperation and mutual aid is for the purposes of warding off things injurious to them. For this reason it is said that man is a political being by nature. In short, as mentioned before, this paper suggests that the *imâm* is responsible for the protection of the legal rights of the individual and the welfare of the state. This includes, for instance, organizing jihad, establishing prayers and collecting the

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<sup>12</sup> The word used in the hadith is “*yu’ammara*”, which is derived from word “*ammara*”. It means “appointed him”, “commander”, “governor”, “lord”, “prince” or “king”. See Edward William Lane, (1984), *Arabic-English Lexicon*, Vol. 1, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 96.

<sup>13</sup> Ibn Taymiyyah, (1955), *al-Siyâsah al-Shar‘iyyah fî Işlâh al-Râ’î wa al-Ra‘iyyah*, Cairo, p. 172.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

*zakâh*. The same applies to the organisation of *al-amr bi al-ma'rûf* and *al-nahy 'an al-munkar*.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Al-Amr bi al-Ma'rûf and Al-Nahy 'an Al-Munkar***

As explained above, the word *al-amr bi al-ma'rûf* and *al-nahy 'an al-munkar* has been mentioned in several hadiths. In addition, it is also the main theme of a number of verses in the Qur'an. Thus in one verse, Allah is calls for solidarity amongst the Muslims:

*“Let there arise out of (min) you a group of people inviting to all that is good, enjoining right and forbidding wrong. And it is they who are successful.”*<sup>19</sup>

In another verse, Allah says:

*“You are the best of peoples ever raised up for mankind, you enjoin right and forbid wrong, and you believe in Allah.”*<sup>20</sup>

The scholars have differed about the meaning of the word '*min*' in the verse 3:104. There are two opinions about its meaning:

1. The first is that it does not indicate sectioning but is a pointer to type. Those who hold this opinion rest their argument on the following two bases:
  - i) Allah has made enjoining good and forbidding wrong an obligation for the entire ummah as explained in verse 3:110.
  - ii) Every person is obliged to enjoin good and forbid wrong with his hand, his tongue or his heart.

If this opinion is the correct one, this verse would be taken to mean: “Be a nation that calls to *akhlâq*, enjoins good and forbids wrong”. It is considered that “*min*” in this verse is similar to “*min*” in the verse: “*So shun the worshipping of (min) idols.*”<sup>21</sup> The word “*of*” in this verse is originally “*from*” in the Arabic. Thus the sentence should read: “*So shun the worshipping that comes from idols*”.

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>19</sup> The *Qur'an*, Āli 'Imrān (3): 104.

<sup>20</sup> The *Quran*, Āli 'Imrān (3): 110.

<sup>21</sup> The *Qur'an*, al-Ḥājj (22): 30.

2. The second opinion is that “*min*” indicates sectioning. Those who hold this opinion rest their argument on the following principles:
  - i) The word “*min*” in this context indicates that there are, amongst the ummah, people incapable of either *da'wah* or performing *al-amr bi al-ma'rûf* and *al-nahy 'an al-munkar*, such as women, the disabled, the elderly and the children.
  - ii) This obligation pertains to the scholars or the clerics. This verse refers to three important tasks: *da'wah* to perform *akhlâq*; the duty of *amr bi al-ma'rûf*; and the duty of *nahy 'an al-munkar*. It is an accepted fact that *dakwah* requires knowledge to know of *akhlâq*, of good and of wrong. A person lacking in this knowledge might call people to falsehood, enjoin them to do wrong and forbid good. Also, a person might be harsh in *dakwah* where gentleness is more appropriate and vice versa. What is more, he might use an inappropriate methodology of *dakwah* and therefore cause no effect on a process or situation. Thus this commissioning is directed at the clerics, who are assumed as the best section of the ummah. This is similar to Allah’s saying:

*“And it is not for the believers to go out to fight all together. Of every troop of them, a party only should go forth, that they may get instructions in religion, and that they may warn their people when they return to them, so that they may beware.”*<sup>22</sup>

Al-Ghazzâlî has observed that since this verse starts with the word “*let there*” (*waltakun*), it signifies an obligation which is a collective obligation of the entire ummah. This means that the obligation is done even if only a section of the community acts on it.<sup>23</sup>

Therefore, this takes us to the next issue, that is the duty of *al-amr bi al-ma'rûf* and *al-nahy 'an al-munkar*, which is a collective responsibility (*fard al-kifâyah*). In other words, all members of the ummah are obliged to perform the duty, but when some of those members undertake this task, the rest are relieved from the obligation. In this case the verse 3:104: “*Let there arise out of (min) you a group of people*”, making it an obligation for some, not all, members of the ummah. In another view, whether collective or individual, *al-amr bi al-ma'rûf* and *al-nahy 'an al-munkar* have been generally characterized as an obligation.

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<sup>22</sup> The *Qur'an*, al-Taubah (9) : 122.

<sup>23</sup> Muḥammad Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzâlî (1993), *Iḥyâ' 'Ulûm al-Dîn*, Vol. 2, Beirût, p. 304

To take another argument, *al-amr bi al-ma'rûf* and *al-nahy 'an al-munkar* are duties prescribed upon every human being according to his capacity. This statement is supported in the hadith mentioned above: “*If one of you sees something wrong, let him change it with his hands...*” In other words, *al-amr bi al-ma'rûf* and *al-nahy 'an al-munkar* is technically required but may be ignored by many if enough others are willing to do so. As it becomes clear, at the point at which we come upon the wrongdoing, or the wrongdoer starts his mischief, we are all obligated; but once it is taken care of, the rest of us have no further obligation.

On another level, the verses under discussion indicate that success hinges on enjoining good and forbidding wrong. This was indicated by a statement covering all those who participated in carrying out the command: “*And it is they who are successful*”. While success belongs specifically to those who discharge the command, blame is apportioned to all those who have the ability to do so in the case where none of them undertakes it. The verses suggest that it is an obligation of collective responsibility and not one of individual responsibility. If some discharged it, the rest are relieved of it. Allah SWT did not say: “*let you all (kullukum) enjoin*”, whereas Allah said: “*let there arise out of you a group of people*”. On the whole, this seems convincing enough and the standard view suggests it as a collective obligation.<sup>24</sup>

The duties of *al-amr bi al-ma'rûf* and *al-nahy 'an al-munkar* are directed at anyone with whom the responsibility for discharging this obligation lies. Also, to those who are not obliged. For the latter group may be able to prevent harm from befalling others, such as children and the madman. They might, for example, forbid children from illegal acts so that they do not grow used to them, or take them to attend prayers so that they would be used to practicing them. The standard view is that the offender or the wrongdoer must be a human. Similarly, it is not necessary for him to be legally competent (*mukallaf*). These conditions are to be applied, otherwise, the action will not be regarded as a sin.<sup>25</sup> For this reason, the mischief of children and the madman is not a sin, indeed, but it is still wrong. For instance, when a boy or the madman drinks wine, they are not sinful because their lack of legal competence guarantees that. But, the action is still wrong and in need of forbidding. To take another example, when a sheep eats plants from one's garden it does not commit a sin because of its lack of legal competence, for obviously – it is not a human. Nonetheless, the action is still wrong and needs forbidding. Or else, it can give damage or destruction to one's garden.

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<sup>24</sup> Michael Cook (2000), *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought*, Cambridge, pp. 17-18.

<sup>25</sup> Al-Ghazzâlî, *op.cit.*, 3: 31.



Another question is what if the wrongdoer is within the class of people to who the duty applies, to be precise, the *imâms*? What are the levels of performance and the norms that need to be taken and possessed? Basically, the levels of performance are limited. In other words, the performer should not at all forbid wrong to *imâm*. Muḥammad Abû Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī (d. 505/1111) explains that the mischief of the rulers is a sin and wrong. Therefore, the performer is obliged to forbid wrong and enjoin good to them. This is the very basic view that has so far been understood from the concept of *al-amr bi al-ma'rûf* and *al-nahy 'an al-munkar*. However, the performance is to be distinguished from the principle because the *imâms* are the ruling party in a country, who possess the power to control its affairs. A detailed explanation will be reviewed in the following paragraphs.

### ***Imâm* As An Agent Of Forbidding Wrong And An Agent Of Wrongdoing**

The word *imâm* as stated here, particularly refers to a political ruler, or in its Arabic form; it is usually called *imâm*. Thus, the title here should be understood as: ruler or *imâm* as an agent enjoining good and forbidding wrong. Nonetheless, in this article I will constantly use the word *imâm*, unless it is stated otherwise. It is hoped that the following exposition will have some valuable impact on the ongoing debate about imam and the duties of *al-amr bi al-ma'rûf* and *al-nahy 'an al-munkar*. It should be acknowledged, however, that this section is only concerned with the views of the scholars of the four major Sunni schools. The views of other schools including Shi'ah, although interesting, will not be discussed.

Most of the prominent scholars like al-Ghazzālī and Ibn Taymiyyah think that the greatest goal of the state or *imâmah* is to enjoin the good and forbid the wrong. For example, performance of prayer, payment of *zakâh*, fasting, establishing truth and honesty, obedience to parents, good relations with kinsmen, good conduct within the household, with neighbours and so forth. *Imâm* as an agent enjoining good and forbidding wrong appears to be a very comprehensive goal; including enjoining socially and economically beneficial practices and forbidding social and economic wrong. What 'is more, the welfare of the people and the country can be achieved through enjoining good and forbidding wrong. The well-being of the people, social and economic well-being, lies in obedience to Allah and the Prophet Muḥammad SAW, which is possible, only by enjoining good and forbidding wrong.

Abû al-Ḥasan 'Alī b. Muḥammad al-Mâwardī, (d. 450/1058), the most celebrated scholar in the eleventh century composed the brilliant exposition of the public ordinances of a government in his famous *al-Aḥkâm al-Sultâniyyah wa al-Wilâyah al-Dīniyyah*. For his ideal government, al-Mâwardī sets down

certain qualifications for the office of *imâmah*. He thinks that the *imâm* had to be from Quraysh blood, male of full age, good character, free from physical or mental disabilities, well versed in legal knowledge, administrative ability and courage to defend the survival of Islam. What is more, he lists the duties of *imâm*: The imam's first duty is to guard the faith on its established principles and on the *ijma'*. The second duty is to execute and preserve justice. The third duty is to secure the lives and property of those he governs, so that people may seek their livelihood freely. The fourth duty is to see that punishment for offences is meted out so that the prohibitions of Islam are not to be violated. The fifth duty is to put garrisons at the frontiers with strength and all proper means. The sixth duty is to organize *jihād* against those who transgress Muslims. The seventh duty is to distribute *zakâh* and other revenues according to shari'ah. The eighth duty is to administer the wealth and financial system. The ninth duty is to appoint competent and loyal officials and the last duty is to give his personal supervision to public affairs.<sup>26</sup>

The defining characteristic of the *imâm* is that he accepts legal responsibility for the well-being of his entire members, over and above his responsibility for the preservation of law and order and provision for common defence. The well-being and improvement of the individual are too important for them to be left to custom, or informal or private initiative. Whereas, the *imâm*, must accept the responsibility.

There are many examples of the conduct of the imams that fulfilled the duty of *al-amr bi al-ma'rûf* and *al-nahy 'an al-munkar*. History shows that the activity was part of the daily practice of the Umayyad caliph 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azîz (d. 101/720). We have heard from elsewhere that the man's high quality is reflected in the generally accepted judgment of the Muslim community on his justice, learning and piety, so much so that he is known as the fifth Rightly-Guided Caliph. On one occasion, he says:

*"If expenditure is made on values like truth, justice, benevolence and honesty, the same will be brought there. On the contrary, if expenditure is made on falsehood, vice, injustice and dishonesty, the same will be brought there."*<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Abû al-Ḥasan 'Alî b. Muḥammad al-Mâwardî (1996) *al-Aḥkâm al-Sulṭâniyyah wa al-Wilâyah al-Dîniyyah*, trans. Asadullah Yate, *The Laws of Islamic Governance*, Ta-Ha Publishers Ltd.: London, pp. 12, 27-28. It has been translated into various languages and in French it is called *les status gouvernementaux*, trans. E. Fagnan in 1915.

<sup>27</sup> Ibn Taymiyyah, *Al-Siyâsah al-Shar'iyah*, p. 178.

Here, he means that if the *imâm* adopts and promotes the positive values he will inspire a positive response from his subjects. On another occasion, he orders cessation of the pronouncement of blessing or benedictions on the caliph after Jum'ah prayer (Friday congregational prayer). He says:

*“Instruct the preachers (khaṭīb) who are the authors of this innovation that they should confine blessing to the Prophet and pray for all Muslims”.*

Furthermore, he adds:

*“Do not pray for me in particular. Pray for Muslim men and women in general. If I am one of them, I shall share the benefit”.*<sup>28</sup>

Another story is when Caliph 'Umar orders to put an end to the previous Umayyad caliph's practice of insulting 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661) in Jum'ah sermons. The practice was the worst innovation that the Umayyād had made. At the time of caliph 'Umar, all mosques were instructed to exclude the imprecation words about 'Alī from the sermon. Apart from that, the mosques were requested to recite the following Qur'anic verse:

*“Verily, Allah enjoins 'adl and ihsân and giving to kith and kin and forbids wrong and evil and oppression. He admonishes you, that you may take heed.”*<sup>29</sup>

Likewise, the 'Abbâsid Caliph Hârûn al-Rashīd (d. 192/809) corrected the behaviour of an ascetic man when they met in Baghdad. The man came up and said: *“O Hârûn, fear God (Allah)!”* He replied: *“Friend, will you share some discourse and questions with me?”* The man answered affirmatively. The caliph continued: *“Am I, or Pharaoh the worst and most wicked?”* The man said Pharaoh was the worst. The caliph said: *“And now tell me, who is better, you or Moses?”* The man said Moses was the best. The caliph continued: *“Do you not also know that when God (Allah) sent Moses and his brother (the prophet Hârûn) to Pharaoh, God (Allah) told them to preach Pharaoh gently.”* The caliph extended: *“The commentators hold that God (Allah)*

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<sup>28</sup> Abd al-Salâm Nadvi (1978), *'Umar 'Abd al-'Azīz*, trans. M. Hadi Hussain, Institute of Islamic Culture: Lahore, p. 116.

<sup>29</sup> The *Qur'an*, al-Naḥl (16) : 90.

ordered them to use Pharaoh's title of respect, even though he was in his insolence and his tyranny, as you have learned. But then you come to me, who am in such a state as you know. I perform the greater part of God's (Allah) commands to me, and I worship none but Him. I stand within His larger limits, and His orders and prohibitions. Yet still you have admonished me with the harshest and most infamous expression, and the roughest, most terrifying words. It is not with God's (Allah) politeness that you corrected me, nor with the behaviour of the righteous that you have acted, so what made you sure you were not putting yourself within my power? Thus you expose yourself to what you could have saved yourself from." At this, the ascetic replied: "I have erred, Commander of the Faithful (*amīr al-mu'minīn*), I beg your pardon..."<sup>30</sup> Similar language may be used of other rulers who took themselves seriously, engaging in enjoining good and forbidding wrong.

The practice of forbidding wrong may extend to the *imām*'s subordinates. Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd, for instance, made the duty a theme of his governorship, cracking down on music and wine. *Imām* might also appoint subordinates for the specific purpose of forbidding wrong. Amongst the Ibādi dynasty (Oman dynasty)<sup>31</sup> at the ninth-century, *imāms* appointed a group to forbid wrong in the markets. Moreover, a nineteenth-century scholar who played a role in the Saudi state speaks of the ruler's duty to assign officials in charge of religious affairs, just as he assigns out tax collectors; these officials are to instruct the people and to command and forbid them. In medieval Islamic societies, the most popular official is called the *muḥtasib*,<sup>32</sup> who was charged with the supervision of markets and morals (*ḥisbah*). According to al-Ghazzālī, *ḥisbah* is the greatest pillar in religion and the most important objective of all Allah's revealed knowledge.<sup>33</sup>

If the country made it its business to forbid wrong in this pattern, there is a tendency that it might seek to transform its role into a monopoly. Not that the virtuous *imām* would be expected to behave in this pattern. The Caliph Abū Bakr (d. 12/634) is said to have said at the beginning of his reign: "assist me if I perform my duties properly, but if I do not perform my task properly get me rectified...carry out my orders till I obey Allah and His Messenger, and as soon as I start disobeying Allah and His Messenger, do reject me outright."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> J. A. Williams (1989), *The Early Abbasi Empire*, Vol. 2, Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, p. 310.

<sup>31</sup> Ibādi is a moderate subject of Khawārij founded in the eight century in Oman, North Africa and Zanzibar. Ibādi political power in Oman began by the first elected *imām* al-Julandā b. Mas'ūd (d. 741 M). See John L. Esposito, *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, Oxford, 2003, p. 123.

<sup>32</sup> Cook, *op.cit.*, p. 471

<sup>33</sup> al-Ghazzālī, *op.cit.*, 2: 310.

<sup>34</sup> Yūsuf al-Kandahlawī (1995), *Ḥayāt al-Ṣaḥābah*, Vol. 2, trans. Majid Ali Khan, Karachi: Dār al-Ishāt, p. 10.

Similar voice was shown by the Caliph 'Uthmân b. al-'Affân (d. 35/656), he is reported to have said at the beginning of his appointment: "*whoever of you sees a wrong, let him put it right: if he lacks the strength to do so, let him refer it to me.*"<sup>35</sup>

Such stories are nonetheless useful in establishing the spectrum. For this reason, we could think a world in which the *imâm* had made himself the sole enjoiner of good and forbiddener of wrong; or at least exhorting his subordinates (clerics and officials) and laymen to perform the duty of *al-amr bi al-ma'rûf* and *al-nahy 'an al-munkar*.

Another issue at stake here is the *imâm* as an agent of wrongdoing. There is a certain amount about what might be called the personal vices of *imâms* and their associates, notably their wine and their deviant entertainment; Mâlik b. Anas (d. 179/795) once caught a caliph while playing chess (in Mâlik's view playing chess is prohibited), and a governor of Medina while eating and wearing forbidden things.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, when 'Abbâsid caliph Abû Ja'far al-Manşûr (d. 159/775) became the second caliph after a violent usurpation and revolt, Mâlik was asked about the legality of giving the oath allegiance (*bay'ah*) to the rebel called al-Nafs al-Zakiyyah (Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allâh). Mâlik answered that the oath was not legal because the oath given to the caliph al-Manşûr was taken under duress and was invalid. As a result, Mâlik was beaten and flogged for his views on duress and, perhaps because of his sympathy with the rebel.<sup>37</sup> Other examples regarding the misdeeds of the *imâm* will show a similar pattern which involved the *imâm*'s power abuse, alcohol consumption and music. The above stories should help us to understand the pivotal issue that guides the *imâm* as agents of wrongdoing.

Now, we have arrived at the final part of this paper. Several questions arise here: What is the process of forbidding the wrongs of *imâms*? What are the levels of performance that are necessary to be taken by the performer or forbiddener?

## **Forbidding The Wrongs Of The Imams: The Process**

Al-Ghazzâlî suggests that where the wrongdoer is a ruler, there is no problem with the process of seeking information, informing and exhorting, but individual

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<sup>35</sup> Cook, *op.cit.*, p. 472.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>37</sup> Khālîd Abou El Faḍl (2001), *Rebellion and Violence in Islamic Law*, Cambridge, p. 76.

subjects may not have recourse to the use of force or violence, since this leads to *fitnah* and to consequences worse than the original wrong. This includes the using of harsh language – expressions such as: “*you are the tyrant*” or “*you are the sinners*”. Moreover, al-Ghazzâlî views that if the using of harsh languages would bring harm to others, it is strictly not permitted; but if he fears only for himself, it is permitted, and al-Ghazzâlî adds that in such way it is admirable.<sup>38</sup>

It is worth examining here in detail the three main levels: seeking information, informing and exhorting:<sup>39</sup>

- 1) The first level is about seeking information about wrongs that are being committed, either by asking from one who keeps the information or observing it by oneself.
- 2) The second level is about informing the *imâm* of the wrongs that are being committed, either verbally or in writing, of the enormity of his misdeeds. Thus if one sees the *imâm* praying incorrectly, he should be told about his drawbacks nicely. To say this once again and as explained above, using harsh words while informing their wrongs is inadvisable. If this proves insufficient, then one proceeds with the next level.
- 3) The third level is about forbidding by exhortation or kindly admonition. This is for an *imâm* who is doing wrong even though he knows it to be wrong, or persists in it after he has learnt it to be so. This may involve repeating to him relevant Qur’anic verses, hadith, opinions of the celebrated jurist, and, perhaps, telling him the anecdotes about early Muslims. Yet, this step needs to be done nicely, wisely and supportively. If this still proves ineffective, there is no way to have recourse to the use of harsh words (rebuke) or the use of force (rebel).

To sum up, al-Ghazzâlî recommends Muslims to practise patience. He furthermore explains that subjecting the *imâm* to anger is likely to incite *fitnah*. This is because there are several hadiths that reflect the Prophets’s prediction of the political unrest that would happen in the *imâm* that came after his own *imâmah* ended. The hadith consistently calls for patience in facing the corrupt and cruel *imâmah*. In line with the requirements of the hadith, al-Ghazzâlî is of the opinion that the *imâm* cannot be stripped of his post due to corruption and cruelty. He, furthermore, forbids rebellion even against a non-Muslim ruler as long as he enforces the shari‘ah to the Muslims and he does not order disobedience to Allah SWT. Al-Ghazzâlî also stipulates that the people are forbidden from committing *baghy* (rebellion) and strictly prohibited from assassinating the *imâm*. This decision is based on his awareness to prevent *fitnah*, bloodshed and other public disturbance

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<sup>38</sup> Al-Ghazzâlî, *op.cit.*, 3: 40.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39-40.

and destruction.<sup>40</sup> He, furthermore, thinks that *baghy* causes greater ill-effects compared to accepting the *imâm*'s cruelty.

Nonetheless, al-Ghazzâlî's view does not negate at all the principle of *al-amr bi al-ma'rûf* and *al-nahy 'an al-munkar* promoted by Islam. In other words, it does not make one passive toward the acts of *munkar* and it is the responsibility of Muslims to change the negative environment. In this context, it does not diminish the rights of the *imâm* to obtain the advice of the people, but the execution of this responsibility is considered as a significant jihad. A hadith states that the responsibility of upholding the truth before a cruel *imâm* is a jihad: "*The best jihad is to speak a word of justice to an oppressive sultân (imâm)*".<sup>41</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

The main conclusions of this study can be summarised as follows:

1. The duties of *al-amr bi al-ma'rûf* and *al-nahy 'an al-munkar* are principles of the Qur'anic teaching and lie at the root of many Islamic laws and institutions, and, therefore, it is the supreme objective of Shari'ah and the moral centre of governmental power.
2. Muslims, in so far as their conditions and capabilities permit, are entitled to speak and to act in pursuit of what in their enlightened judgement seems good, or they can forbid, whether in action, words or silent (heart) denunciation, any wrong which they see being committed. Nonetheless, it remains as the collective obligation in which everyone ought to participate to the extent of their ability. There is only one situation where *al-amr bi al-ma'rûf* and *al-nahy 'an al-munkar* becomes an individual obligation, and that is when there is only one person in the entire community, or when a single individual witnesses evil being committed.
3. There are only three levels or steps of forbidding wrong that can be applied or made in regard to the *imâm*: seeking information; informing; and exhorting. Nonetheless, harsh words may be used if there is no fear of inciting fitnah. As it becomes clear, al-Ghazâlî thinks the main purpose of *al-amr bi al-ma'rûf* and *al-nahy 'an al-munkar* must always be the removal of wrong and it should not be attempted if it is likely to invite more trouble.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibn Taymiyyah (1963), *Majmû' Fatâwâ*, Vol. 35, p. 9-11.

<sup>41</sup> See *Abû Dawûd*, 'Kitâb al-Jihâd', 4330.

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