

A Critique of Current Positions Concerning the Nature of Immaculacy ('*esmat*)

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Abstract

Most theologians (*motekallemān*) consider immaculacy³ ('*esma'*) to be a [form of] divine grace (*mohebbat-e elāhī*) which is bestowed on those who are immaculate (*ma'sūm*), and they believe that those who are not granted this benefit do not have the ability to attain to this station. Some have considered immaculacy to be a result of [the attainment of] a clear and indubitable knowledge, while others have likened it to an angel which [acts to] preclude the committing of sin. This group of positions concerning immaculacy are subject to serious criticisms: issues such as the relationship between immaculacy and free will, the value of the station of immaculacy, and the differences which obtain between those who have attained to this station and ordinary people, all entail questions which none of the current positions concerning immaculacy is able to provide

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3. [*Esmat* in its most general sense is translated here as immaculacy. Hence, immaculacy = sinlessness (i.e. the Sunnite position) + inerrancy (the condition which most Twelver Shi'a theologians add). Thus, in order to bring about more clarity of purpose, the word sinlessness will be used when the simple Sunnite position is intended, and infallibility will be used when the Twelver Shi'a position is intended (which is inclusive of inerrancy as well as sinlessness). – Translator.]

satisfactory answers to. This article posits that refraining from sin (*esmat azgonāh*) is a volitive phenomenon and that everyone has the ability [*in potentia*] to reach this station; but that inerrancy, i.e. the avoidance of error (*esmat az khatā va eshtebāh*) is an involuntary phenomenon which is a precondition for the station of prophethood and/ or of the station of the imamate.

[Thus, this paper posits that] having chosen a given person for the station of prophethood and/ or for the station of the imamate, Almighty God immunizes him from the committing of any and all error in order [to guarantee] that he will not commit [any] error in the explication [and promulgation] of His religion. It is the view of the authors that this is the only position that [is capable of providing] lucid answers to the above-mentioned objections.

Keywords: Esma, Esmat, immaculacy, infallibility, inerrancy, sinlessness, justice, free will, grace, knowledge.

Introduction

The issue of immaculacy (*esmat*) has always been the subject of serious discussion throughout Islamic intellectual history. One of the sub-topics of this discussion has to do with the quiddity or true nature of immaculacy, which entails a large number of questions which must be answered satisfactorily; for a failure to provide proper responses to these objections means that the phenomenon of immaculacy itself will not be able to be defended either. The questions which follow are among those which demand clear and unambiguous responses.

What are the specific attributes of one who is sinless (*ma'sūm*) which precludes the committing of sin in him or her? Are those who are sinless compelled to avoid the committing of any and all sins and are bound to act only in ways which are righteous? And if the answer to this question is affirmative, then how can we justify the praise of their righteous conduct, and how can we believe this conduct of theirs is subject to reward from Heaven. And if the answer is negative, i.e. [if the truth of the matter is that] such persons refrain from sin at the behest of their own free will, then the question becomes: What then is the difference between such people and ordinary folk? The element of free will is shared in common by all people; so why is it that some become sinless (*ma'sūm*) whereas others do not, but rather, become morally corrupt and even descend as far down as those who deny God (*kofr*) or even those who put up a pretense of belief while harboring unbelief in their hearts (*nefāq*). Is there a grace (*mohebbat*) bestowed by God on account of which those who are its recipients become immaculate? And if this is the case, then why does Almighty God grant such grace to certain of His subjects and demur from gracing others of His subjects with this heavenly merit? Is [the attaining to] such a [station of] immaculacy necessarily of value [in

and of itself], and [should it therefore] be considered [the attainment of a station of moral and spiritual] perfection for [its recipients, i.e.] those who are sinless?

Each of the theologians of the Imāmīya or Twelver school have striven to explicate their own take concerning the nature of immaculacy, and to provide responses to the above questions on the basis of their beliefs and teachings. In this article, we shall strive to investigate the extent of the precision with which they have been able to respond to these questions, and to apply a greater measure of precision [as need be]. Furthermore, we will not be focusing on [the specific] positions [of a given theologian or theologians]; rather, our aim is to provide a depiction of immaculacy which most closely confirms to the fundamental tenets and teachings of the sacred religion of Islam and [= as expressed in] [the literature of] the Imāmīya or Twelver school or rite (*madhhab*).

1. The Definition of Immaculacy

The word *al-esma'* is derived from the tri-letteral root (*jadhr*) 'a-sa-ma meaning refraining (*molāzemāt*; *amsāk*)¹, or prohibition (*man'*)², and protection (*hefz*)³. This word does not appear in the Qoran, but there are several instances where words which are derived from the same tri-letteral root appear where they are used to convey the same meaning or meanings which are closely related.⁴

The specific or “technical” meaning of the word *esmat* is the following:

1. Eben Fāres, 1404.

2. *Ibid.* and Eben Manzūr, 1997.

3. Eben Manzūr, 1997.

4. See: Āl-Imrān: 101 and 103; Nisā: 146 and 175; Mā'ida: 67; Ahzāb: 17; Hūd: 43; Yūnus: 27; Ghāfir: 33; Yūsof: 32; Hajj: 78; and Momtahana: 10.

“A person’s being immune to major and minor sins, to error, and to lapses of memory”.¹ There are differences of opinion among Moslem thinkers, however, concerning the [exact] nature of immaculacy. As will be seen in the pages which follow, the majority of Shī’a scholars consider immaculacy to be a divine grace which is bestowed by Almighty God on those who are [= thereby become] immaculate.

2. Types of Immaculacy

Generally speaking, there are two types of immaculacy: sinlessness (*esmat azgonāh*) and inerrancy (*esmat azkhatā*). What is meant by sinlessness is that the person who is sinless will not commit a single sin in the entirety of his or her lifetime, [no matter how minor]. What is meant by inerrancy is that, in addition to not committing a single sin, such a person does not commit any error (*khatā*), and is not subject to a lapse of memory (*sahv*; *nesyān*)² or doubt [throughout the entirety of his or her lifetime]; and that if he or she passes a judgment on a[ny] given subject, his or her judgement will always be the correct one. Additionally, one who is inerrant is always immune to error when it comes to evaluations and/ or judgement concerning his or her personal situation and condition.³

Each of the above types of immaculacy are in turn sub-divisible into more detailed parts, but [delving into] these [subdivisions] is not

1. Mozaffar, no date, p. 54.

2. [Wikifeqh.ir defines *sahv* as forgetfulness or heedlessness, and differentiates it from *nesyān* by stating that in *sahv*, one is [temporarily] not able to recall the actual form of a given object [or the content of a given subject or concept] from one’s memory bank, whereas in *nesyān*, the form of a given object [or the content of a given subject or concept] has been [permanently] erased from one’s memory bank. – Translator]

3. Javādī, 1387, V.9, pages 17–20.

necessary [for the purposes of our discussion].¹

3. The Various Positions

There are various positions concerning the nature of immaculacy, but most of these can be boiled down to one of the following three positions which consider immaculacy as being (1) a grace from God, (2) [something having to do with] knowledge, and (3) as something [having to do with] an angel. Now before we delve into the questions regarding the nature of immaculacy and how each position has responded to them, it is necessary to fully explicate each position. Thus, our approach will be firstly to provide a clear explication of each position, and then go on to a discussion of the questions which arise with respect to each position.

3.1 Immaculacy considered as a Grace (*lotf*) from God

According to Farāhidī, the *lotf* in everyday usage means [an act of] goodness, beneficence, virtue and munificence.² In the parlance of the theologians, *lotf* [is considered to be an act of God whose subjects are the *mokallefīn*, i.e. those upon whom a burden of religious duty is placed, and] is divided into two parts: *lotf-e mohasseland lotf-e moqarreb*. [These technical phrases can be translated respectively as a grace which brings about the satisfaction of a *taklīf* or religious duty on the part of the *mokallef* or obligor (لطف محصل); and a grace which brings about all of the necessary *conditions* for the *mokallef* or obligor to satisfy or fulfill his or her burden of religious duty (*taklīf*), but the measure of such a grace is not sufficient to guarantee the fulfillment of such a duty; rather, the conditions are completely fulfilled, but the accomplishment of the religious duty (*taklīf*) is left up to the free will of the obligor (لطف مُقَرَّب).]

1. Cf. Majlesī, 1404, v.11, pages 89-90.

2. Farāhidī, 1414, under “*Lotf*”.

[Hasan Hellī has stated in this regard:]

“Effectuative” or “necessary and sufficient” grace (*lotf-e mohassel*) is an act [of God] which, in the event of its occurrence, the person who has taken on the burden of religious duty [to obey God’s ordinances] (i.e. the *mokallef*) obeys God and refrains from sin by virtue of his own free will. “Approximative” or “necessary but not sufficient” grace (*lotf-e moqarreb*), on the other hand, is an act [of God] which, in the event of its occurrence, the person who has taken on the burden of religious duty [to obey God’s ordinances] (i.e. the *mokallef*) becomes close[er], approximates or moves close[r] to obeying God and refraining from sin, and when this [type of] *lotf* obtains, the necessary *conditions* for the *mokallef* or obligor to satisfy or fulfill his or her burden of religious duty (*taklīf*) are brought about, [but the actual act of fulfilling that duty is left to the obligor’s free will].¹

The position of immaculacy considered as a grace (*lotf*) from God is the most common position concerning immaculacy, which is usually expressed in the following formulaic expression: العصمة لطف يفعلها الله تعالى: بالمكلف

“Immaculacy is a grace which Allāh the [Sublimely] Exalted acts upon in favor of the *mokallef* or religious obligor.”²

The subject matter which the Shi’a theologians have expressed in the explication of this point of view generally consists of three specific elements:

1. Immaculacy is a grace from God.

1. Hellī, 1988, p. 303.

2. *Ibid*, 1415, p. 424; FādelMiqdād, 1405, p. 301; Eben Nowbakht, 1414, p. 73; SharīfMortadā, 1405, v.3, p. 325).

2. This grace brings about [a state of] immaculacy.

3. There is no contradiction between [the bestowal of] this grace and the free will of the recipient of the grace; i.e. those who have had this grace bestowed on them by God nevertheless attain to the station of immaculacy by virtue of their free will.

The first matter that comes to mind with respect to this issue is: what [exactly] is meant by the “grace” which is mentioned in the literature which posits this position? In other words, is what is meant by “grace” here the everyday usage of the word which means an act of goodness, beneficence, virtue and munificence on the part of God; or is what is meant the “technical” definition of the word as used by the theologians?

In some of the usages [of the word *lotf* in the literature], it has been used in its theological and technical sense. Those who use the word in this latter sense, utilize it in order to arrive at a proof for immaculacy.¹ But this [idiomatic] definition of the word *lotf* is not seen in the usage of other thinkers. [In these other cases,] the word *lotf* in the formulaic expression “Immaculacy is a grace which Allāh the [Sublimely] Exalted acts upon in favor of the *mokallef* or religious obligor”, appears, on its surface, to be used in a way that is close to the idiomatic or everyday meaning of the term, and in such cases, it would appear that what is meant by *lotf* is an act of goodness, beneficence, virtue and munificence on the part of God. If this is the case, this usage of the word *lotf* does not pertain to the Proof of Grace. But this is not to say that the Proof of Grace cannot or does not yield any results when applied to the proofs of the immaculacy of prophets or imāms; rather, what this means is that the way in which grace is used in such instances are usages which yield meanings which are not the same as that of its usual, idiomatic usage and meaning. And

1. Lāhijī, 1362, p. 90; Cf. also *ibid*, 1383, p. 379, and Tūsī, 1406, p. 130.

the question of whether or not immaculacy can be proved by way of the Proof of Grace is another discussion altogether which is neither proven nor refuted by the way in which the expression is used in these cases.¹

On the basis of the above, then, it can be said that in the usage of the theologians, the word grace (*loṭf*) has been used in both senses: both in the theological sense that is used in the Proof of Grace, as well as in the usual idiomatic sense of a munificent gift and mercy from God.

3.2 Immaculacy considered as a phenomenon having to do with Knowledge

According to this position, each time a firm or categorical knowledge (*elm-e rāsekh*) is attained [by a given person] concerning the sinfulness, immorality or ignominious consequences [of a given act], then such a knowledge will invariably act to prevent the carrying out of such an act [on the part of the person who is in possession of such knowledge].² Divine grace causes those who are immaculate to attain to such [a degree of] knowledge; and when this knowledge obtains, the immaculate will refrain from committing sin by virtue of his or her own free will without the need for any [other external] control [mechanism].³

The main assumption behind this position is that knowledge, and especially a knowledge which is clear and unequivocal, will necessarily be followed by an act or acts [which are in conformance with that knowledge].⁴ Allāme Tabātabāī believes that this this [type of] knowledge is very different than other kinds of knowledge, and that such

1. Mofīd, 1413, p. 66; Khārrāzī, 1418, v.1, p. 249.

2. Fādel Meqdād, 1422, p. 244; and 1405, p. 302.

3. Tabātabāī, 1391, v.2, pages 134-139; v.5, pages 78-81; and v. 11, pages 155-164.

4. Motahharī, 1371, pages 12-13.

a knowledge must *necessarily* be accompanied by [concomitant] actions.¹ But irrespective of this, there are others [such as Ayatollah Mesbāh Yazdī] who number among those who consider immaculacy to be a phenomenon that is related to knowledge but who do not believe that knowledge alone suffices to guarantee immaculacy, and believe that other elements such as upbringing and education are also necessary.²

3.3 Immaculacy considered as something having to do with an Angel

The *foqahā* (doctors of sacred jurisprudence cum theologians) consider the soundness of one's moral character (*'edālat*) to be one [of the primary] preconditions for [anyone properly to qualify as] a judge, a source of religio-legal emulation (*marja'-e taqlīd*), as a witness, as a Friday congressional prayer leader, etc. and liken this [attribute] to an angel of the soul (*maleke-ye nafsānī*) which bids a person to refrain from sin and to perform [all of] the religiously ordained duties (*wājebāt*) [without fail].³ Thus, when we talk of the "Angel of Immaculacy", it is something that is close to the Angel of *'Edālat* or the Angel [which acts to maintain and warrant] the soundness of one's moral character.⁴ On this basis, then, there is an angel within the soul of one who is immaculate (*dar nafs-e ma'sūm*) which prevents him or her from committing sin.

Having discussed and critiqued various positions on the nature of immaculacy, Khwāja Nasīr [od-dīn at-Tūsī] goes on to posit our last two positions as those which predominate (i.e. the position of immaculacy as obtaining due to knowledge, and as a result of an angel situated within

1. Tabātabāī, 1391, v.5, p. 79.

2. Mesbāh, 1367, v.2, pages 70-72.

3. Āmolī, 1410 (Lunar), v.1, p. 792.

4. Narāqī, 1363, p. 97.

one's soul). KhwājaNasīr then proceeds to attribute the position of immaculacy as emanating from an angel to the theosophers (*hokamā*), and states in this regard that “Immaculacy is an angel whose possessor does not sin”.¹

Allāme Hellī has attributed the position of immaculacy as emanating from an angel to the “predecessors of old” (*pīshīniān*), explaining it as follows: “the ‘predecessors of old’ have said that immaculacy is an angel that has its place in the soul whose presence precludes its possessor from committing [any] sin.”²

3.4 Other Points of View

There are points of view other than the above three which are not as important as them. These positions describe immaculacy variously as an attribute³, an instinct (*gharīza*) and as a power of the faculty of intellection (*qowwat-e ‘aql*)⁴, as a power (*nīrū*) or [power of/ which] command[s] (*amr*)⁵, and as a transmutation or transubstantiation of sin (*estehāle-ye dhanb*)⁶, etc. These various positions can either be categorized as essentially conforming to one of the above three definitions, or, if not, have [major] logical inconsistencies [and can safely be ignored].

4. Objections and Solutions

Several objections have been raised concerning the above positions.

1. إنها ملكة لا يصدر عن صاحبها معها المعاصي. Tūsī, 1985, p. 369.

2. Hellī, 1415, p. 125.

3. Bahrānī, 1406, p. 125.

4. Lāhījī, 1383, p. 379.

5. Tabātabāī, 1391, v.2, pages 34 & 137.

6. Tūsī, 1985, p. 455.

These objections are serious, and it is difficult to respond to them in a satisfactory manner on the basis of the aforementioned positions. We shall now proceed to explicate these objections and the responses which have been proffered to them, and end with an evaluation of them.

4.1 Immaculacy and Volition

The above positions concerning immaculacy were similar in that they all considered the immaculacy of the prophets as arising from certain factors which were generally envisioned to be internal factors which were in turn affected by external factors. In other words, irrespective of whether we consider immaculacy as being a grace from God, something having to do with knowledge, or with an angel, at all events, it is a phenomenon which is bestowed on immaculate persons as a consequence of a grace from God, which grace precludes its possessor from committing sin, error, lapses of memory, and so on. This attribute is seen most clearly in the position which posits immaculacy to be a grace. Now the first question that arises immediately relates to the issue of the relation between immaculacy and volition. In other words, if we posit that immaculacy is a phenomenon which is affected by internal and external factors, the question arises as to whether or not the volition of one who is immaculate plays a role in refraining from sin and error, or not?

Shī'a theologians have all considered immaculacy to be a volitive act on the part of those who are immaculate. Those who posit immaculacy to be a grace usually insist that [the bestowal of] such a grace does not strip the immaculate person of his or her power of volition. But the issue of contention is that the line of demarcation between [the effective] limits of [the operability of] grace and the power of volition of the immaculate person or persons is unclear. If the actions of the immaculate person is carried out under the power of his or her own volition and divine grace

does not play a part in it, then grace does not have any efficacy and cannot be considered to be a guarantor of immaculacy. But on the other hand, if the actions of the immaculate person is carried out under the aegis of divine grace and the immaculate person's volition does not play a determinative role in the act, then immaculacy must necessarily be non-volitive. And if we posit that a *portion* of the actions of the immaculate person is carried out under the aegis of divine grace, and other portions of his or her actions are carried out independent of such grace and under the aegis of the immaculate person's own volition, then [it follows that] the ambit of the actions of the immaculate person is *not* under the aegis of divine grace; and that therefore, grace is not operable in this portion and does not guarantee [immaculacy]; and it also follows that in the ambit of the actions of the immaculate person which *are* under the aegis of divine grace, grace is indeed [fully] operable in this portion, and that therefore, all of the actions in this portion are predetermined [and non-volitive].

In any event, the rationale and justifications which have been proffered by those who favor the position which posits immaculacy as a kind of grace are untenable. Such justifications can only be valid when it can be convincingly demonstrated that grace and volition are not mutually exclusive, and as we have just seen, such a position does not exist.

Now the position where immaculacy is conceived of in terms of its being an angel can obtain in one of two ways:

1. The angle of immaculacy is obtained as a result of the effort of the immaculate person himself or herself. In this event, this angel is similar to the Angel of Righteousness or the Angel of '*Edālat*' (or the Angel [which acts to maintain and warrant] the soundness of one's moral character), and is completely volitive. The supporters of the position where immaculacy is conceived of in terms of its being an angel do not

accept this formulation.

2. The angle of immaculacy is obtained as a result of divine grace.

If the position where immaculacy is conceived of in terms of its being an angel is formulated in terms which are similar to the second of the above two possibilities, then such a position is subject to the same objections which we discussed just prior to the present discussion when we discussed the objections that can be brought against the position of immaculacy conceived of as a divine grace.

The *olamā* (doctors of sacred jurisprudence cum theologians) have relied on two methods for demonstrating that grace and volition are not mutually exclusive:

1. Some have claimed that divine grace eliminates the desire to sin from the immaculate person.¹ According to this thesis, grace does not act on the will of the immaculate person, but rather, it is the *desire* of the immaculate person which changes as a result of the grace, so that the immaculate person will never have a desire to sin within himself or herself given the presence of divine grace.

With this formulation, the problem of the mutual exclusivity of immaculacy and volition is resolved; but another one [immediately] appears in its stead, and that is that, if this is the case, then is an immaculacy of this nature at all a merit or distinction for its possessor? We shall discuss this question in detail in a section that follows in which the value of the station of immaculacy is discussed.

2. The majority of the people who consider immaculacy as a phenomenon having to do with one's knowledge have resolved the

1. Hellī, 1415, p. 424.

dilemma of the mutual exclusivity of immaculacy and volition by referring immaculacy to the knowledge of the immaculate person. Accordingly, the immaculacy of the immaculate person is not influenced by any external factors but is influenced only by intrinsic dynamics. These internal elements, furthermore, are not posited to be of the class of desires and inclinations, but are said to be of the class having to do with awareness. Thus, it is stated that the immaculate person does not sin but rather obeys [God's ordinances fully] on account of the fact that he or she is [fully] aware of the shameful consequences of sinning and is [fully] aware of the [excellences of] the consequences of righteous acts.

This formulation has certain distinctions compared to other positions; but at the same time, it is also subject to serious objections.

The most serious objection to this position is [its assumption] that awareness is a guarantor of action, whereas this is not the case. It is possible that knowledge and awareness play an important role in one's choices, but this does not mean that such knowledge and awareness will [invariably] *guarantee* that the correct choice is made.

The position of those who consider immaculacy as a phenomenon which arises as a consequence of one's knowledge is clearly refuted by the story of Satan's rebellion against God's command. The Noble Qoran presents Satan as a creature who was fully informed when he rebelled against God's command [to prostrate himself before Adam], but one who nonetheless demurs from obeying God's command because he believed that he was better than Adam.¹

Another objection is that if knowledge obtains for everyone, then it cannot be said that immaculacy is the special province of the Fourteen

1. [Reading *ādam* for *insān* – Translator.] See A'rāf, verses 11 to 18.

Immaculates¹ and is limited only to them. And that if [there is a *special* kind of knowledge which] has been given to these few persons exclusively, then immaculacy should not be considered a distinction for them, because anyone who is the beneficiary of this virtue will [also automatically] become immaculate [through no effort of their own].

4.2 Immaculacy as grace or acquired distinction

What we mean by immaculacy as a grace is that Almighty God has bestowed such a grace as a gift to a certain number of His servants and devotees – a gift which is bestowed by God on those who are immaculate, and who would not have been able to attain to this station absent this bestowal. And what we mean by immaculacy as an acquired distinction is that immaculacy has *not* been bestowed by God on those who are immaculate, but that rather, they have attained to this station as a consequence of their own efforts.

As stated earlier, from the perspective of the theologians (*motekalemān*), immaculacy is a grace which Almighty God grants to a certain number of His servants and devotees. Such is the explicit position of those who consider immaculacy to be a divine grace. From their perspective, immaculacy is a divine grace which is granted to immaculate persons after certain preconditions are in place and [after the determination that they] merit [such a bestowal]; and thus, immaculacy can never be subject to acquisition [by merely human effort]. And we can also add that the positions of those who consider immaculacy to be a phenomenon that relates to knowledge or to be an angel also boil down to this same position.

4.3 The Value of the Station of Immaculacy

1. [In Shī'a belief, this refers to the Prophet, his luminous and impeccable daughter, Lady Fātema' oz-Zahrā, and the Twelve inerrant Imāms. – Translator.]

The question that immediately comes to mind in this section is whether or not an immaculacy that is a grace is something that should be considered to be a distinction or point of pride? Should those who have attained to the station of immaculacy as a consequence of the bestowal of such a grace by God be subject to our praise and be rewarded [for such attainment]? The reason for posing the question is that if immaculacy is indeed a grace and if those who are immaculate have no role in its acquisition, then this should not be considered to be a distinction because *any* person will attain to such a station as long as he or she becomes the beneficiary of such a grace and benefit.

This objection is generally responded to by stating that the bestowal of immaculacy on those who are immaculate does not happen without reason and without cause, but that rather, it is bestowed on persons in whom the appropriate background which merits such a bestowal already exists.

Shī'a thinkers have generally been satisfied to state that immaculacy is bestowed on persons in whom the appropriate background which merits such a bestowal already exists, and they leave it at that; remaining silent the issue as to the exact nature of the background which merits such a bestowal. Some explanations can be found in some of the literature regarding this matter, but these are not without their own problems.¹

Given the lack of transparency and clarity of these explanations, the question as to the exact nature of the background which merits the bestowal of God's grace remains an open one.

5. An Explication of the Volitive Position

Now that we have evaluated the most common positions concerning

1. Cf. Mesbāh, 1379, p. 162 and Sobhānī, 1420, pages 23 – 34.

immaculacy and discussed some of the objections which apply to them, it is necessary to explicate the positions which we consider to be acceptable.

As was stated at the beginning of the essay, generally speaking, there are two types of immaculacy: sinlessness (*esmat azgonāh*) and inerrancy (*esmat azkhatā*). Many of the objections which have been posed to the issue of immaculacy arise as a result of the confusion of these two categories. And as long as there is not a clear separation between these two types of immaculacy, no clear answers can be given to the objections which have been posed.

The thesis that this essay proposes, in short, is the following:

The first type of immaculacy, i.e. sinlessness, is the Angel of Righteousness (*taqwā*) which arises as a result of God's general grace which encompasses every human being, and which immaculate persons merit receipt of at a higher level due to the excellence of their own efforts; but the second type of immaculacy, i.e. inerrancy, is a non-volitive condition for which the immaculate person stands in need of a special grace from God. Thus, the *special* grace of God – be it knowledge or anything else that we might suppose – only has efficacy in the second category of immaculacy, namely, inerrancy. But sinlessness is a kind of immaculacy which the immaculate person attains to as a consequence of his or her own unique efforts.

Sinlessness is an acquired trait whose possibility is open to all human beings. Using His effective wisdom (*hekmat-e bāleghe*), Almighty God chooses the most worthy and deserving individuals who have attained to the station of sinlessness (*esmat*) by virtue of their own efforts for investiture to the office of prophethood or to the office of the imamate. But the stations of prophethood and the imamate are sensitive stations

such that anyone who is vested in either office must be endowed with the station of inerrancy (*esmat azkhatā*) as well as with the station of sinlessness (*esmat azgonāh*). And because inerrancy (*esmat azkhatā*) is a state which is outside of the domain of volition of the person and stands in need of special [divine] intervention, Almighty God immunizes prophets and Imams against the committing of errors and lapses in memory, etc., all of which is summed up in the expression inerrancy (*esmat azkhatā*).

Thus, attaining to the station of sinlessness precedes attaining to the station of prophethood or the station of the imamate, and [is a volitive act that] is acquired. But inerrancy is a divine grace which is a condition of the station of prophethood or the station of the imamate.

The foregoing was a summary treatment of our discussion. The detailed exposition follows under two heads.

5.1 Sinlessness

The following preliminaries are necessary before we proceed to the explication of the subject at hand.

1. Almighty God has created human beings, and has tasked them with attaining to the highest spiritual stations possible by way of devotion, servitude, and refraining from vices; and has determined certain limits [which must be complied with] in order for man to attain to these high spiritual stations. Almighty God states in the Noble Qoran: [51:56] *And [tell them that] I have not created the invisible beings and men to any end other than that they may [know and] worship Me.*

2. There might be certain people who are able to take advantage of the situation and reach lofty spiritual stations by refraining from vices and by their devotion to God's ordinances. There are no reasons which prove that

this is not in the realm of possibility. To the contrary, the mere fact that Almighty God has commanded [mankind] to refrain completely from sin and to abide fully and completely by all of His ordinances speaks to the fact that this feat is indeed possible, for if this were not the case, such a command would be in vain, and God is sublimely exalted above such a presumption.

3. God's wisdom necessitates that He choose His prophets and Imams from among the best of mankind, and the best of mankind are pure human beings who have never once in their lives been tainted with the pollution of sin. Such persons have not even had the thought of sin or the thought of doing what is second best in favor of doing that which is best ever occur to them, and nothing has been on their minds throughout their lives but the obtaining of God's good pleasure.

4. These persons are none other than the prophets and Imams who are endowed with such distinctions of character, and whom Almighty God has chosen.

The problem that remains is we are looking for a guarantee for immaculacy. In other words, [if we grant that] there is [or can be] a given person who has not committed any sin, then there should also be a guarantee that such a person will not commit a sin from this point forward either. Yet, for someone who has not committed any sin, say, for the first three decades of his or her existence, there is no guarantee that he or she will continue not to commit any sin for the remaining duration of his or her life. And let us further assume that God chooses this person for investiture into the office of prophethood. What possible guarantee can there be that this person will not degenerate morally a couple of years into the term of his prophethood. What, then, would become of the office of prophethood? Would this then not be taking God's command lightly?

The answer is that, as has already been stated, one of the criteria for being invested in the office of prophethood or the imamate is for the person being invested not to rebel against the commands of God for the entirety of his lifetime. When Almighty God intends to invest such a person in the office of prophethood at, say, twenty-five years of age, He knows by virtue of His innate divine knowledge whether or not this person will commit a sin. If such a person will commit a sin sometime throughout his life, he will not be vested in the office of prophethood by God.

In the Nadbe (lamentation) Supplication we read: “And You knew that they would be faithful to their covenants, and so You accepted them [to Your service]...”¹ The phrase “And You knew that they would be faithful...” in the quoted passage is a reference to the same subject which we talked about, i.e. it is stated in this passage that Almighty God knew “from the beginning” that they would be faithful to the covenant which He had entered into with them, and it was for this reason that He selected them.

This rationale serves to explain the attaining to the office of the imamate of some of the imams prior to their having reached the age of majority (i.e. in childhood). In other words, Almighty God knew by virtue of His innate divine knowledge that these imams would not commit any sin for the duration of their entire lives, which is why he chose to invest them in the office of the imamate from early childhood.

Thus the sinlessness of immaculate persons is a volitive act which is a function of the general grace of God – a grace which benefits the entirety of humanity, and which is referred to in the following verse: [47:7] *O you who have attained to faith! If you help [the cause of] God, He will help you, and will make firm your steps.*

1. Qomī, no date, p. 532.

And if God's special grace is to be bestowed upon those who have attained to the station of immaculacy, it is on the basis of this same general grace. In other words, because such a person fulfills the condition of the sentence: *If you help [the cause of] God, God in turn realizes the promise of He will help you, and will make firm your steps.* And because others do not fulfill the condition or fulfill it at a lower stage, He will not help them or will help them at a lower level of assistance.

In this way, the relationship between immaculacy and volition is established [i.e. the apparent mutual exclusivity is resolved]; and also, immaculacy as a grace is established without sacrificing the inherent merit and distinction of its recipients.

5.1.1 Reasons for the Substantiation of this Thesis

The most important reason for giving preference to this thesis over the other positions is that this thesis resolves the problems which were inherent in the other positions, such as: the lack of clarity and transparency of the relationship between immaculacy and free will; immaculacy arising from God's grace [which seemingly denies the operability of free will]; the value of the station of immaculacy and its perfection, and so on. And this is because in this thesis, sinlessness (*esmat*) is posited as a completely volitive phenomenon.

This thesis will only lose its preferability when it is proven that it is not possible for human beings to refrain from sin throughout the entirety of their lifetimes; but such a proof is not possible.

5.1.2 Confirmations

There are verses of the Noble Qoran as well as *hadīth* reports from the Imāmīya *hadīth* corpus which confirm that which we have proposed. For

example, there is verse 69 from the Surat an-Nisā:

[4:69] For, all who obey God and the Apostle shall be among those upon whom God has bestowed His blessings: the prophets, and those who never deviated from the truth, and those who [with their lives] bore witness to the truth, and the righteous ones: and how goodly a company are these!

The above verse specifies that those who obey God and His Messenger will be gathered up on the Day of Resurrection in the company of the prophets, those who never deviated from the truth, the Martyr-Witnesses, and the Righteous. Now the question which remains to be asked is: How is it possible for a human being to attain to a station where he or she is worthy of being gathered up on the Day of Resurrection with the prophets and in the company of the others referred to in the above verse? What is certain is that a person whose sins outweigh his or her good deeds cannot attain to the above-mentioned station, because in the final analysis, a sinner is a sinner, and the other-worldly station of being resurrected in the company of saints is a sacrosanct station which should be out of the reach of sinners; [and this would] even [apply] if his good deeds outweigh his sins.

Given this, two other possibilities remain:

1. That this person is a sinner, but that Almighty God has forgiven him his sins and erased them.
2. That this person never once committed a single sin during his lifetime, which is the case of Immaculacy.

There is no specification in the verse and perhaps in no other place that the station referred to in the verse is the exclusive province of those who have repented or have been forgiven by God for whatever other reason,

and which [would therefore] exclude the possibility of the second group [i.e. those who are immaculate] from being able to be considered to be the subjects of the verse in question.¹

There are *hadīth* reports which act as other confirmations for this theory in which the Apostle of God is reported to have stated that certain individuals who perform certain deeds will be gathered by his side on the Day of Resurrection. Among these reports there is a report which states that the Apostle of God held his index and middle fingers together and said that “Me and he who provides guardianship for an orphan will be like this in Heaven”. There have been different interpretations put forth concerning the exact identity of such guardians,² but what is certain is that the Apostle of God specifies that guardians of orphans (*kāfil al-yatīm*) will be positioned alongside His Eminence the Prophet in Heaven,³ and that the placing of his two blessed fingers in close proximity to each other and referring to them is an indication of how very close the station of the two of them shall be. What we can gather from the specifics of this report is the great extent to which ordinary people are capable of being spiritually elevated whereby they become deserving of being in the close company of the Apostle of God. And it is self-evident that such proximity is a lofty and exalted station indeed, and that it is a far cry from a spiritual station which a sinner can attain to.

5.1.3 The Roots of this Theory in the Words of the Olamā

The first person whose position is very close to the thesis put forward in this paper is Seyyed Mortadā. Seyyed Mortadā is an advocate of the

1. Cf. FakrRāzī, 1420, v.4, p. 132; and Teyyeb, 1378, v.4, p. 130.

2. Majlesī, 1404, v.35, p. 117; Nūrī, 1408, v.2, p. 474; and Tabarsī, 1385, p. 167.

3. Reading *janna* (per the report) for *rūz-e qīyāmat*.

position which thinks of immaculacy as a divine grace, but the way he formulates his position is different than that of other [thinkers].¹

Seyyed Mortadā does not accept the limiting of the bestowal of divine grace to the exclusive province of the Immaculates:

Whenever it is the case that God knows that an individual can benefit from the bestowal of sinlessness (*esmat*) by way of obedience to the Way of God and refraining from sin, then it is incumbent on Him to bestow His grace upon such a person as a fulfillment of that person's right [with God], even if that person is not an Apostle or Imam.²

Seyyed Mortadā states that the grace which is bestowed on those who are immaculate has several attributes:

1. This grace is by no means a guarantor of immaculacy. Rather, Almighty God bestows His grace on any person whom He knows will not sin but rather will benefit from the bestowal of such grace.

2. This grace is not [bestowed] exclusively on the Apostle and the Imams; rather, Almighty God bestows it on anyone whom He knows will benefit from it.

Ayatollah Javādī-e Āmolī is one of the people to whom the thesis of this paper can be attributed with only a slight modification. He states that:

That which is exclusive and which comes about as a result of God's grace and which cannot be acquired by means of the exertion of one's efforts are [the stations of] prophethood, Apostleship, and the Imamate... The Immaculate Imams are twelve in number. But it is possible to become bereft of sin (*ma'sūm*), just as Her Eminence Lady Fātema'oz-Zahrā was

1. SharīfMortadā, 1405 Lunar, v.3, p. 325.

2. *Ibid*, p. 326.

endowed with the Angel of Immaculacy (*esmat*), without her being vested in the office of prophethood, Apostleship, or the Imamate.¹

The late Mohammad Rezā Mozaffar has also formulated a position on immaculacy which is close to that which we are proposing. He states:

Immaculacy consists of being bereft of major and minor sins, and of error and lapses of memory, even though the occurrence of such matters is not logically impossible in a prophet.²

In the position that we present in this paper, it has been emphasized that immaculacy is attained by virtue of the individual striving and effort of the immaculate person without any outside influence. The late Mohammad Rezā Mozaffar's position is in accord with this explanation also. He considers immaculacy to be a form of *tanazzoh*, [i.e. to be an immunity from sin which is arrived at as a result of an ongoing act of self-purification and the personal transcendence which comes about from a personal disavowal of sin and the personal effort which is exerted in order to maintain that disavowal (*tanazzoh*)], and does not believe it to be a form of grace or anything else which may be placed within the constitution of the immaculate person; and this conception of disavowal (*tanazzoh*) is in harmony with the thesis which we have put forward.

The above items are not the only ones which can be used as confirmation of the thesis of this paper. Rather, similar formulations of the issue can be seen in the writings of other thinkers as well.³ Therefore, although the point of view which has been proffered in this paper concerning immaculacy

1. Javādī-e Āmolī, 1379, v.9, p.22.

2. Mozaffar, no date, p. 54.

3. For example, cf. Mesbāh, 1379, p. 162; Sobhānī, 1420, p. 21; and JamīlHamūd, 1421, v.1, p. 434.

has the feel of a novel presentation about it, it can be claimed that it is a viewpoint which has its roots in the thought of previous thinkers.

5.1.4 Immaculacy in Others

Based on the foregoing, there are no dimensions [to the issue of sinlessness] which persons other than the Fourteen Immaculates cannot attain to. But the question as to whether or not persons other than the Fourteen Immaculates can attain to the station of sinlessness (*esmat*) is one matter, and the question of whether or not we are able to determine if such and such a person is sinless (*ma'sūm*) is quite another. It is entirely possible for persons other than the Fourteen Immaculates to attain to exalted stations of spiritual perfection as a consequence of their strenuous personal efforts, but we do not have any way to determine who such people are. And this is because the prerequisite of our being able to make such a determination would be our being privy to all of the various states and conditions of such a person's life, and even being privy to the secrets of his or her life; and it is self-evident that such knowledge is beyond the ken of ordinary human beings.

There are both rational and scriptural proofs concerning the proof of the immaculacy of the prophets and of the Imams, while for the proof of the immaculacy of Her Eminence Lady Mary, for example, we have only scriptural proofs. But we do not have any specific [rational] basis for determining the sinlessness (*esmat*) of ordinary persons. The positive affirmation of the sinlessness (*esmat*) of ordinary persons is not problematic, but no method exists for proving such a possibility.

5.2 Inerrancy

When inerrancy (*esmat azsahvvakhatā*) is discussed, what is meant

is inerrancy concerning any act which might occur as a result of ignorance, forgetfulness or error. Error and forgetfulness [and ignorance of something] do not occur as a result of a choice made by the person in question but occur when no intention is at play. And so because ignorance, forgetfulness and error are non-volitive acts, therefore it follows that inerrancy from these acts must also be involuntary and outside of the ambit of the will of the individual.

Given this, the response to the question as to whether immaculacy is a volitive or involitive phenomenon must be that *esmat* as sinlessness is a volitive phenomenon whereas *esmat* as inerrancy is a non-volitive phenomenon. The phenomenon which is moral and normative and has consequences of reward and punishment in the hereafter is sinlessness, whereas inerrancy has no such consequences. But in so far as the office (*maqām*) of prophethood and of the imamate are sensitive in nature,¹ and because the prophets and Imams must be inerrant in order to maintain the immunity of the religion [= of the exemplary models of the religion] from error, it is therefore necessary for the prophets and Imams to be inerrant. And this is why Almighty God protects the prophets and Imams from the possibility of committing any error.² This aspect of immaculacy,

1. [This is because they entail having to provide an exemplary model for the way of life which Almighty God has intended for us by virtue of His Providential Lordship, and because this Providential Lordship is exclusive only to God. Therefore, His representatives must carry out the act of being exemplary models flawlessly, for we cannot be asked to follow a model that is flawed, and then be punished for following a flawed model. This is the basic Shī'a argument for why the prophets and Imams must necessarily be inerrant as well as sinless: it has to do with their *hojjatic* function. – Translator.]

2. [Here is one of the major relevant Qoranic passages in support of this position – Translator] : [72:26] He [alone] knows that which is beyond the reach of a created being's perception, and to none does He disclose aught of the mysteries of His Own unfathomable knowledge, [72:27] unless it be to an apostle whom He has been pleased to elect [there for]: and then He sends forth [a

i.e. inerrancy, is the special province of the prophets and Imams. The rest of humanity is neither charged with carrying out such a sensitive and exacting mission, nor does there exist any proof to prove that they have been invested in such an office.

The fact that inerrancy is involuntary does not pose any special problems because this species of immaculacy is a prerequisite of the office of prophethood and of the imamate, and it is something which Almighty God bestows on His prophets and Imams in order to ensure that His divine message reaches its intended audience inerrantly.

6. The Holy Spirit

Some *hadīth* reports have been used as the basis for positing that the element which grants prophets immaculacy and their steadfastness and steadiness of speech and behavior is the external element known as the Holy Spirit. For example, Abū-Basīr reports:

“I asked Imam as-Sādeq concerning the noble *āya* [42:52] *And thus, too, [O Muhammad,] have We imbued you with a Spirit of Our command, [coming] at Our behest. [Ere this message came unto thee,] thou didst not know what revelation is, nor what faith [implies]...* His Eminence stated: ‘The Spirit is a creature from among God’s creatures who is greater than Gabriel and who accompanied the Apostle of God and informed His Eminence of various things and aided him, and who accompanies the Imams after His Eminence’s passing.’”¹

sentinel before and behind him] to watch over him in whatever lies open before him and in what is beyond his ken – [72:28] so as to make manifest that it is indeed [but] their Sustainer's messages that these [apostles] deliver: for it is He who encompasses [with His knowledge] all that they have [to say], just as He takes count, one by one, of everything [that exists].

1. Koleyni, 1365, v.1, p. 273.

These [kinds of] reports have provided grounds for spurious arguments to be levelled against the phenomenon of immaculacy, especially with respect to its relationship to free will. Thus, it is stated that if those who are immaculate are protected by the Holy Spirit, then they would have no will of their own and would constantly be under the sway and volition of the Holy Spirit.

But the above objection can only be valid if those who are immaculate are protected in the refraining from sinning aspect of their immaculacy by the Holy Spirit as well as in their inerrancy; but from what has been stated above, it has been established that the Holy Spirit plays no part in protecting the prophets and the Imams from sinning. This angelic creature acts to immunize the prophets or Imams from ignorance, error, forgetfulness and the like. Thus, the ambit of the role of the Holy Spirit pertains only to inerrancy and not to sinlessness.

7. Summary and Conclusion

In the above paper, we mentioned the following points:

1. The most important positions concerning the nature of immaculacy consist of the three positions which consider immaculacy as being (1) a grace from God, (2) something having to do with knowledge, and (3) as something having to do with an angel. In this paper it was established that it is not possible to provide satisfactory answers to objections which are raised concerning the nature of immaculacy by relying on the above-mentioned positions.

2. From the perspective of this paper, sinlessness can be likened to the Angel of Righteousness (*taqwā*) and is a function of the general grace of God which applies to all human beings, and which those who are immaculate acquire at a higher level than the rest of humanity. But

ignorance, error and forgetfulness are involuntary acts immunity and protection (*esmat*) from which stands in need of a special grace from God.

Refraining from sin (*esmat azgonāh*) is something that can only be brought about by the exertion of personal effort and is something which can [potentially] be acquired and is a station which can [potentially] be attained by every human being. Using His effective wisdom (*hekmat-e bāleghe*), Almighty God chooses the most worthy and deserving individuals who have attained to the station of sinlessness (*esmat*) by virtue of their own efforts for investiture to the office of prophethood or to the office of the imamate.

But investiture to the office of prophethood or to the office of the imamate is a perilous undertaking and anyone who is so vested must be protected from error and ignorance and lapses of memory and the like [in addition to being sinless], and because this inerrancy aspect of immaculacy is outside of the ambit of that individual's volition, he stands in need of a special support in order to be able to accomplish it. And it is for this reason that Almighty God immunizes such individuals from the possibility of committing any error, and this is what is called inerrancy. Thus, sinlessness precedes investiture to the office of prophethood or the imamate and is a volitional act; whereas inerrancy is a special grace from God [which pertains to acts which are outside of the ken of one's volition] and which is a necessary condition of the office of prophethood or the imamate.

3. And finally, the most important reason for proving the veracity of the position presented herein is that it is not subject to the objections which can legitimately be raised against the other positions on immaculacy which have enjoyed currency. We can conclude by saying that basically,

the thesis presented in this paper is the only way to provide clear and satisfactory responses to the objections which have been raised concerning other formulations of the concept of immaculacy.

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