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# AN ANTHOLOGY OF ISMAILI LITERATURE

## A SHI' I VISION OF ISLAM

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## Khayrkhwāh-i Harātī

Khwāja Muḥammad Riḍā b. Sulṭān Ḥusayn was a native of the village of Ghūriyān, a dependency of Herat in present-day Afghanistan. He lived in the 10th/16th century and commonly referred to himself as ‘Khayrkhwāh,’ the ‘Well-wisher.’ The following is an extract from the beginning of one of his works, entitled simply *The Epistle (Risāla)*. The passage delves into the importance of spiritual edification, or *ta’līm*, and the role of the Ismaili hierarchy, the *ḥudūd-i dīn*, in leading the adepts to a recognition of the divine. It also elaborates the existence of three categories among creatures. In the spiritual world, those of the first category testified with knowledge and conviction to God’s sovereignty over them; the second category also testified to God’s sovereignty, but only in imitation of the first category; and the third category denied the sovereignty of God altogether. The physical world was created so that those of the second category could attain true recognition and certainty. Meanwhile, the first category manifested in the world as the *ḥujjat* or ‘proof’ of the imam so as to nurture the souls of the second category and to lead them to God by spiritual edification (*ta’līm*), while the third was manifested to nurture the physical life of the second category.

### *Risāla*

#### The Epistle<sup>1</sup>

*O God, O our Lord.*

*In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.*

The goal and purpose of composing these words and penning these expressions is as follows: In our days a veil has been drawn upon the face of truth due to the incapacity and unworthiness of human beings to do without that veil. But now, by his abundant blessings and perfect guidance, Haḍrat-i Mawlānā (i.e., the imam), (may his power and might be exalted) has opened the doors of bounty to his obedient subjects, and has given leave for the veil to be removed from this matter. He appointed this humble

1. Muḥammad Riḍā b. Khwāja Sulṭān Ḥusayn Ghūriyānī Khayrkhwāh-i Harātī, ‘Risāla,’ ed. Wladimir Ivanow in *Taṣnīfāt-i Khayrkhwāh Harātī* (Tehran, 1961), pp. 1–3; ed. Sayyid Shāhzāda Munīr b. Muḥammad Qāsim-i Badakhshānī, in *Khayrkhwāh-i muwaḥḥid-i waḥdat* (Mumbai, 1915), pp. 1–5; this selection tr. Shafique N. Virani. The Persian text is faulty in places. While the edition of Ivanow is followed here, occasionally Sayyid Shāhzāda Munīr’s edition gives a better reading and is used for the translation. The introduction to this chapter is by the translator.

servant to accomplish this service and convey this summons. I therefore considered it obligatory in this task to first raise the awareness and consciousness of the friends (*rafiqān*) of all regions and the respondents (*mustajībān*) of all realms by allusions and indications. Thus, the effect of these words and the influence of this message should be apparent to them. Following this, the aim will be more clearly and unambiguously communicated.

The *pīr* (spiritual master) is the doctor of souls and thus resembles a physical doctor. In some cases, a physical doctor commences treatment by rooting out the source of the illness, not by administering food and drink.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the spiritual doctor must first address the source of the spiritual illness that afflicts the respondents. That illness is ignorance. In our days, this is held to be the illness of the spirit. Thus, if their ignorance is not pointed out to them right at the outset, they will not be led out of that valley [of believing] that ignorance is not the issue. So long as they do not sincerely accept this and express remorse,<sup>2</sup> nor heave sighs of regret about their past and completely leave that stage behind, they will not enter the stage of seeking wisdom, which is knowledge and gnosis of the lord. What is the use of taking them to that which they do not seek?

It is also apparent that as many of those who now boast of [belonging to] this faith are commoners, explanations suitable to them will be used and we will not begin with proofs based on Arabic expressions. Those who are cast into confusion must seek a proof, so that matters may be clarified for them using both intellectual and scriptural explanations. Why the respondents (*mustajībān*) and teachers (*mu'allimān*) have come [to this world], what their purpose here is, what they must accomplish, what each of them had done aforesaid and the word of each should be explained to them.

Right at the outset, it must be known that the goal and purpose of the coming to this world of the respondents and others, who are the manifestation of the second category, is the recognition of the Exalted God (may His name be glorified). In the spiritual world, because they testified [to the sovereignty of God] by mere imitation (*taqlīd*) [rather than conviction, *taḥqīq*], they begged to achieve a status of certainty (*yaqīn*). The Exalted God accepted their prayer. He created this physical world especially so that they could achieve His recognition. It was not created for those of the first or third categories. In the spiritual world, those of the first category testified [to the sovereignty of God] through conviction (*taḥqīq*) and certainty (*yaqīn*), so there was no need for them to come to this world. The members of the third category completely denied [the sovereignty of God], and continue to do so here, [but] they appear in the world because of the claim that those of the second category have over them. The appearance of the first category, which manifests as the *ḥujjat* (proof), is to nurture the souls of the respondents, while the appearance of the third category, which consists of the exotericists, minerals, plants and animals, is to nurture their bodies. This is because the soul cannot attain recognition without the body, and the body cannot survive without these necessities.

1. Read *daf'-i mādda-yi maraḍ mī kunad* for *daf'-i māda-yi mar' namī kunad*.

2. Read *muta'assif* in place of *manṣūf* (as per Munīr) or *munṣif* (as per Ivanow).

It must also be known that the *dā'īs*, *mu'allims*, greater *ma'dhūns*, and lesser *ma'dhūns*, who are members of the spiritual hierarchy (*ḥudūd-i dīn*) below the category of the *ḥujjat*, belong to the second category. As the spirits of the members of the second category are differentiated, some being more noble and powerful than others, they are called the people of ranks (*ahl-i tarattub*). The strong among them are the four aforementioned ranks, and the weak are the respondents (*mustajībān*).

It must also be known that the recognition (of God), which is the purpose of the coming of the second category (to this world), cannot be attained by the intellect alone. There are many scriptural and intellectual proofs that bear this out. Here also lies the difference between this community and other communities. There are others who maintain that [this recognition] can be attained by the intellect on its own. However, this community maintains that both intellect and spiritual edification (*ta'līm*) are necessary. Nonetheless, it is improper to accept spiritual edification from just anyone. The one who gives this spiritual edification must possess an exclusive trait and miracle in which nobody else shares, that is, his very species establishes the recognition of the Exalted God.<sup>1</sup> This is unattainable by others and is called the miracle of knowledge; in other words, it is a knowledge displayed by nobody else. Everything else in existence shares in mere physical miracles with the perfect ones.

The one who communicates this miracle of knowledge is the *ḥujjat* of the imam. This is because the imam gives this miracle (of knowledge) only to the *ḥujjat*, who then conveys it to others. There can only be one (supreme) *ḥujjat* at a time, and this is why the imam is symbolized by the sun and the *ḥujjat* by the moon. Just as there is but a single sun and moon in this physical world, there is only one imam and *ḥujjat* in the world of religion:

There is a path from the heart of the *ḥujjat* to the imam (*ḥaḍrat*).  
He becomes aware by the spiritual support (*ta'yīd*) of his heart.

(Translated by Shafique N. Virani)

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1 The *kih* in this sentence must be omitted.