



Imām إمام

This Arabic term designates a leader, in particular the leader of a religious group, but also the founders of Islamic law schools and leading theologians and intellectuals.

In Islamic ritual prayer, the imām is the leader of prayers, particularly the Friday communal prayers. This role can be combined with the duties of the preacher of the Friday sermon (*khutba*). The imām should be knowledgeable in religious matters and in the Qur'an.

The imām is also a political leader, and a leader of the Islamic community. In the Sunni world, the imām is identified with the caliph (*khalīfa*), as the successor of the messenger of God. These were the companions of Prophet Muhammad, starting with Abu Bakr, who was succeeded by 'Umar and 'Uthmān. Initially, the caliph was the religious and the political leader of the Islamic community, but later the leader of the congregational prayers became a separate office.

In the Shi'a tradition, the imām is a political and religious leader who has a blood relationship with Prophet Muhammad, starting with 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib.

The founders of the Islamic schools of law established specific qualities that the imām should possess, whether obedience was due to him and whether the imām should be the most excellent from the Islamic community. Sunni doctrine stipulated that there should only be one imām at a time, and specified other qualities which included knowledge of Islamic law, moral probity, religious orthodoxy, and physical fitness. With the rise of powerful dynasties, such as the Seljuks, the power of the caliph came to be seen as representative of Islam, for instance by al-Ghazali.

With regard to the theological schools, the Mu'tazila defended, for instance, the idea that an unjust imām should be removed.

Within the Shi'a communities, the Twelver Shi'a held that the imām was infallible and divinely guided, in addition to having religious knowledge similar to that of the Prophet. According to Ismailis, the imām is sinless and infallible.

Alfarabi, who built the first complete philosophical system within the medieval tradition of Islamic philosophy, expands on the duties of the imām, inspired by Plato's philosophy and Islamic theology. His theory of the role of the imām is embedded in his philosophical system, which displays strong metaphysical and political themes. The imām or leader of the Islamic community stands to the community as God to the universe, providing guidance and sustenance, in a hierarchical structure. In his magnum opus, *The Principles of the Ideas of the Inhabitants of*

the Virtuous City, Alfarabi explains how the world, celestial and terrestrial, comes to be from God, and how the human faculties are structured. He then describes the ideal political state, which requires a perfect ruler. This ruler must be a religious leader and also a philosopher. Some of Alfarabi's views are reminiscent of Plato's theory of the philosopher-king in the *Republic*. Other aspects of his description of this ruler recall Islamic theological views. Among the qualities that the ruler should possess are a strong physique, good understanding and memory, truthfulness, and the virtues, especially justice. He should also be a philosopher and know how to apply the law. The virtuous city requires a philosopher and a prophet as leader. This leader helps citizens to acquire the virtues which will allow their souls to survive in the afterlife. This presupposes that each citizen has a correct view of reality, either through religion or through philosophy. The ruler should be able to explain reality through both philosophy and religion. These views are present in other works by Alfarabi, such as the *Aphorisms of the Statesman* and *The Political Regime*. In *The Attainment of Happiness*, Alfarabi argues that the imām, the philosopher, and the legislator are the same person.

In his commentary on Plato's *Republic*, Averroes defends the idea that the king should be a philosopher, and that he should be virtuous and be able to teach the multitude, in a characterization that resembles Alfarabi's. He also states that the terms philosopher, king, lawgiver, and imām are synonymous.

This term therefore has highly significant religious and philosophical overtones in the Islamic intellectual tradition.

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