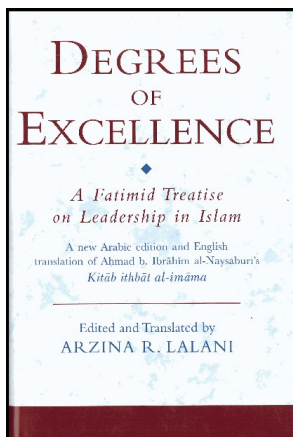




The Institute of Ismaili Studies



## *Degrees of Excellence* *A Fatimid Treatise on Leadership in Islam*

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*This book forms part of The Institute of Ismaili Studies – Ismaili Texts and Translations Series, 8 and is a translation of the Kitāb ithbat al-imāma by Ahmad b. Ibrahim Al-Naysaburi. In it, Al-Naysaburi allows the readers to understand not only the significance of his own thought, but also the beliefs of his age. This valuable source of Fatimid historiography will prove interesting reading for students of Islamic history, philosophy and theology.*

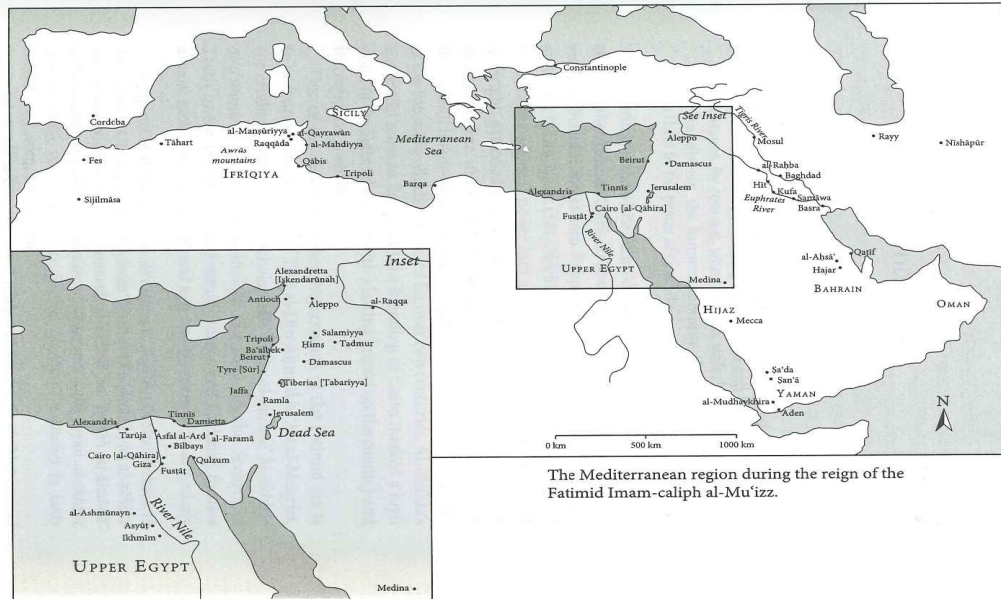


Figure 1: Source: *Towards a Shi'i Mediterranean Empire*, London 2009.

*Kitab Ithbat al-Imama* aims to understand how *imamat* was articulated as a natural and philosophical model of authority and leadership by one of the well known Fatimid Da'is of his time. Al-Naysaburi uses the theory of *degrees of excellence* to argue that the *imamat* is the supreme leadership.

Questions of authority and leadership are quintessential to all human societies. They have also formed an integral part of Muslim history and thought. Al-Naysaburi, a distinguished scholar from the Fatimid period, was among the many da'is who attempted to grapple with this subject. In his work, the *Kitab ithbat al-imama*, he discusses issues related to the authority of the *imamat* during the time of the sixth Fatimid Imam-Caliph al-Hakim bi Amr Allah (996-1021 CE).

Al-Naysaburi's *Kitab Ithbat al-Imama* is situated at a time of particular debate around the notion of *imamat* and whether this was a necessity on account of revelation only or also based on reason. Other works written prior to Al-Naysaburi were 'exposed to a series of refutations and reviews not only among Sunni and Zaydi authors but also by fellow Ismaili scholars (p.5)'. The *Tathbit al-imama*, attributed to the third Fatimid Imam-Caliph al-Mansur bi'llah (946-953 CE) prior to Al-Naysaburi's text, maintains that 'the *imamat*

was, for him, *fard akbar*, that is the greatest religious duty on humanity without which it cannot function or act righteously' (p.8). Al-Naysaburi expands on this premise in his works.

The *Kitab ithbat al-imama* is divided into seven sections each of varying length. The first section is a prayer, a salutation and an introduction to his work including an explanation on how it is different from those previously written on the subject. In section two, the author describes the 'necessity of the *imamat* innately and intellectually as well as in nature, in self-evident patterns and norms' (p.10). In sections three, four and five, Al-Naysaburi gives details of the degrees of excellence from all species and the disparity amongst them, providing examples of these degrees and showing the testimony of the symbol and the symbolised with further analogies of the excellence of the sun over other planets. The sixth section pertinently reveals the 'chain of being' with minerals, plants, animals and humans at the peak who are endowed with intellect while at the same time demonstrating the imam as the quintessence of creation. The seventh section establishes his premise that the world could never be without an *imam* and 'seeks to establish the *imamat* from the time of Adam' (p.11).



### Guiding Questions:

1. His Highness the Aga Khan has often referenced facets of the Fatimid period of our history, noting that they provide precursors of attitudes which are pertinent for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Among these are notions of the role of intellect and the promotion of knowledge. How does this work enable us to get a firsthand insight of how these notions flourished during that time?
2. How was the authority of the Imam-Caliph articulated during the time of the Fatimids and how is this different from the way in which *imamat* is articulated today by the Ismailis and other Muslim communities?
3. This work was written by Ahmad b. Ibrahim Al-Naysaburi, a distinguished Fatimid scholar. Why is it important to understand the author, his audience and purpose for writing? And how does this knowledge contribute to our understanding of both the historical time at which this piece of work was written and the positions or viewpoints it reflects?

### Setting the Scene

Ahmad b. Ibrahim Al-Naysaburi was a distinguished Ismaili scholar during the Fatimid period primarily during the reigns of Imam-Caliphs al-Aziz bi'llah (975-996 CE) and al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah (996-1021 CE).

Although little biographical information is available on Al-Naysaburi, his *nisba* Nishapuri (Al-Naysaburi in Arabic) suggests that he came from Nishapur, 'the centre of the Ismaili da'wa in Khurasan' (p.4).

In addition to the *Kitab ithbat al-imama*, written in the early part of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Al-Naysaburi's other works include *Kitab isti'ar al-imam wa tafarrug al-du'at fi'l-jaza'ir li-talabi-hi* (Book on the Imam's Concealment and the Dispersal of Da'is in Search of him to Different lands) and *Risala al-mujaza al-kafiya fi adab al-du'at* (Brief and Concise Epistle on the Etiquette of the Da'is) among

others. The *Risala al-mujaza* gives 'an excellent description of the characteristics and duties of the ideal da'i' (p.6). Al-Naysaburi's works and ideas had considerable influence on his contemporaries, including Hamid al-Din al-Kirmanī (996 – 1021 CE) and Abu'l Fawaris (d.1028 CE), both of whom also wrote on the *imamat*. Al-Naysaburi's *Kitab Ithab al-imama*, the subject of this book, is an 'important representation of the Fatimid vision of the *imamat*' (p.8).

This work by Al-Naysaburi can be best understood with regard to the debates regarding the notion of *imamat* at the time. While all Muslims traditionally agreed on the necessity of an *imam*, Sunni scholars came to position the *imamat* within law rather than within the principles of faith (*usul al-din*).

This is in contrast to the Shi'a who place the *imamat* at the core of religion. The major difference revolved around whether leadership or *imamat* was necessary only by way of revelation or also through reason. With this in mind, and given the context of that period, Al-Naysaburi is 'responding to the contemporary discourse taking place amongst scholars of different persuasions, on whether or not the *imamat* was valid on intellectual grounds' (p.24).

### Al-Naysaburi's approach to the *Ithbat*

Al-Naysaburi, who was a high ranking official in the da'wa, speaks of the dignitaries and hierarchies in his *Ithbat* but does not mention any by name. According to him, the hierarchy is organised in six layers with the *imam* forming the seventh layer and its apex.

In his *Ithbat*, Al-Naysaburi mentions the philosophers although avoids naming them. Al-Naysaburi draws on the works of different philosophers and appropriates their thought into his writing. This was commonly done by writers and thinkers of the time. Ibn Sina was a contemporary of Al-Naysaburi who 'subscribed to the views of Aristotle, but did not follow them in those aspects which Ismailis found most congenial in their thought' (p.14). It is possible that Al-



**Fatimids:**

Shi'a Ismaili dynasty which ruled in Egypt and North Africa from 908 to 1171 CE. The name is derived from the connection of its rulers to Fatima, the daughter of Prophet Muhammad. In this way, the Fatimids claimed to be the rightful heirs to Muslim rule. At its height, Fatimid sovereignty extended to many parts of the Middle East, the Mediterranean and parts of India. The period of Fatimid rule is particularly noteworthy for its cultural, scientific and economic achievements.

**Umayyads:**

The Umayyads, famous as 'the first dynasty', ruled in Damascus from 661 to 750 CE, deriving their names from the Quraysh clan of Banu Umayya. The dynasty came to power when Muawiyya (d. 680 CE), governor of Syria and nephew of Uthman Ibn Affan (third caliph), challenged Imam 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib's claim to the Caliphate. It was during the Umayyad period that Muslim rule expanded into Europe in the west and into India in the east. The dynasty ruled through fourteen caliphs until it was overthrown by the Abbasids, who moved the capital of the Caliphate to Baghdad.

**Abbasids:**

Muslim dynasty whose period of rule, in varying degrees of dominance, lasted from 750 to 1258 CE. They came to power claiming descent through an uncle of Prophet Muhammad, Al-Abbas. The leaders of the dynasty seized power through a series of battles in Persia and Syria, promising a return to justice and legitimate rule. One of the caliphs, Al-Mansur (754—775 CE), built the city of Baghdad, which became the capital of the dynasty.

Naysaburi was therefore responding to Ibn Sina and al-Farabi, Ibn Sina's predecessor, by also employing 'Aristotelian logic to prove his theology' (p.14).

The approaches used by Al-Naysaburi to affirm the *imamat* include religious duties, tales of the prophets and arguments from philosophers and mathematicians. It is his theory of *degrees of excellence* which forms the firmest proof of the *imamat*. His contemporary Abu'l Fawaris briefly alludes to it as well. Al-Naysaburi argues that the

**Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani** (died after 1020-1 CE), a major Ismaili *da'i*, scholar and writer from the time of the Fatimid Caliph-Imam, al-

'*imamat* or supreme leadership is everywhere in the universe as well as within our inner selves, in the very essence of our being' (p.17). He suggests that *imamat* is a supreme form of authority that permeates the universe and is not limited simply to earthly beings. Additionally, the author defines the *imamat* as the pole and foundation of religion and that 'it is the *imam* who stands at the apex of humanity' (p.17) to further his argument. This theory of *degrees of excellence* extends to all creatures and genera of minerals, plants and animals.

The institution of *imamat* is at the very crux of Al-Naysaburi's treatise in which he uses intellect followed by Qur'anic verses and Prophetic tradition to further substantiate his argument. According to Al-Naysaburi, 'the *imam*... is always present in the world: the world is never deprived of him, while the messenger comes forth at certain times and not at others' (p.10).

***Kitab ithbat al-imama* – Book on Affirming the *Imamat***

Al-Naysaburi begins his *ithbat* by praising God and seeks blessings for 'Ali, the 'truthful legatee' (p.31) and 'the *imams* descended from the martyr' (p. 31) meaning Imam Husayn. He then seeks blessings for the commander of the faithful, the lord of the age and time, Imam-Caliph al-Hakim bi Amr Allah.

Al-Naysaburi sets the stage for his treatise by

**Da'wa** (lit. 'invitation' or 'call'): In the Qur'an and among certain Muslim groups *da'wa* came to signify the summoning of people to the practice of true Islam as well as to a particular political cause, as in the case of the Abbasids in the eighth century. Among the Fatimids, the *da'wa* was the formal institution responsible for preaching and education. Its use has continued to modern times among Muslims to indicate the continuing goal of preaching and inviting to Islam.



establishing, as early as paragraph two, that ‘the *imamat* is the pole (*qutb*) and foundation of religion (*asas al-din*) around which revolve all religious and worldly matters, and [it is] a benefit for this present life and the life hereafter’ (p.32). Religious law and foundation and its interpretation (*ta’wil*) are understood through the *imamat* as well as the knowledge of God’s absolute unity (*tawhid*). Al-Naysaburi also goes on to clarify that recognising the status of the *imam* does not give precedence to the *imamat* over messengership, ‘because in the affirmation (*ithbat*) of the *imamat* there is affirmation of the messengership’ (p.32).

#### *Degrees of Excellence*

In order to explain the notion of *degrees of excellence*, Al-Naysaburi uses various analogies and symbols. He begins by arguing that souls gain their nourishment and purification from the influence of the *imams* and their knowledge.

Al-Naysaburi states that God created all things ‘different and disparate in respect to excellence’ (p.38). And these derivations are

**Ibn Sina, Abu Ali al-Husayn (980 – 1037 CE)** was a philosopher and physician, known in the West as ‘Avicenna’. Of Persian descent, he was born in Afshana in the province of Bukhara. He is renowned as the ‘Hakim’, exemplifying this role as both a wise thinker and a physician. As a child prodigy, he mastered the traditional Muslim sciences as well as most of the classical works of antiquity known to Muslims, and earned his living as a physician, developing his professional reputation in several courts.

**Al-Farabi, Abu Nasr (870 – 950 CE)** was an eminent Muslim philosopher born in the region known as Turkestan. Al-Farabi was regarded among Muslim philosophers as ‘the second teacher’ because of the esteem in which he is held after Aristotle. His many works encompass commentaries on Aristotelian and Platonic thought, logic, metaphysics, ethics, political philosophy and other philosophical subjects.

evidence and proof of affirming the *imamat* and the *imams*. God has set an upper limit, a lower limit and a virtue for all genus and species and additionally, He made certain aspects of genera and species ‘principles in creation, without which the world of humans cannot do, nor their bodily existence and function are complete’ (p.38). This concept is also used by Abu’l-Fawaris who argues that the wisdom of mankind is derived from God who has ultimate knowledge. As stated above, this clearly demonstrates that the disparities between genera and species on earth each serve a purpose which God has created, whether they are the upper limit or lower limit. Moreover, the proof of the *imams* in every age and time is seen through the ultimate limit and highest summit in each genus and species.

One of the most useful analogies used by Al-Naysaburi is comparing the *imam* to the four constituents; heat, cold, dryness and humidity. The most noble among these is heat from which ‘arises luminosity, light, motion and elevation while the other three are established through it’ (p.42). Likewise, the *imam* represents heat as it illuminates our soul and has precedence in origin.

Another example used by Al-Naysaburi is among the celestial spheres. The most lofty sphere is the outermost around which all other celestial spheres must orbit. By the same understanding therefore, the *imam* is the most lofty in religion.

These examples help to understand the varying degrees of excellence present in everything and also serve as evidence for the idea that the *imam* is at the peak. Al-Naysaburi uses further examples to demonstrate his theory.

#### *The Imam as the peak of the Degrees of Excellence – Analogies*

Al-Naysaburi uses many interesting examples to further his argument that the *imam* is the summit of the degrees of excellence. A powerful analogy used is the likeness of the *imam* to the sun. Al-Naysaburi begins by



saying that the planets have disparities between their degrees of excellence however the sun is the noblest amongst them all. This is because it is through the sun that plants, animals and newborns grow and receive nourishment; just like the *imam*, who is the light of our souls and provides the necessary illumination and enlightenment. As well, if the sun were to change its position from its usual orbit, even by a little, the entire world would be destroyed. In the same way, if the *imam* were to change position, religion would be destroyed.

Among the melting substances, gold is the most excellent. It is not affected by water or fire and it is a medium by which people conduct their economic transactions. The *imam* is akin to gold, as the *imam* cannot be destroyed by water or fire and ‘is the most excellent religious and intellectual substance in his age and time’ (p.45). At the same time, it is the red ruby that is considered the most precious stone. The ruby does not get transformed by fire or water and retains its purity and radiance.

The *imam* is this precious stone; the crown jewel in all creation during his age and time. The *imam* is ‘the apex whose status, rank and position no one is able to attain in his age or time,’ (p.46) just like the precious red ruby.

Al-Naysaburi uses a beautiful example of plants at the beginning of section six. He says that we have now reached a stage where plants can serve as antidotes for those on the verge of death. In the same way, the words of the *imam* are like antidotes giving humankind hope and pulling them away from despair, doubt and death. Furthermore, humankind is the pinnacle of God’s creation and the *imam* is the pinnacle of all humankind. Humanity is guided through the *imams* to recognise the creator and learn the necessity of gratitude.

The comparison of the *imam* to a parent as well as a doctor is used to make the audience appreciate the merciful nature of the *imam* along with his position at the summit of nobility. Just as our bodies require treatment from medical doctors, our souls require the

*imam* for purification and healing. This is for all humankind regardless of their obedience and behaviour, further exemplifying the *imam*’s mercy. Furthermore, the *imam* tolerates hardship and bad behaviour from all humankind as does the noblest of parents, and continues to pray for humankind’s guidance on the right path and salvation.

#### Governance

In his discussion on leadership and the qualities that a leader should possess which include nobility, perfection, knowledge and purity, Al-Naysaburi also makes special reference to authority. Philosophers have divided authority into three categories: the authority of the individual (*siyasat al-khassa*), the authority of the family (*siyasat al-hamma*) and the authority of the general populace (*siyasat al-amma*).

The governance of the individual is ‘such that he stops himself from all vices, bad traits...’ (p.61). Individuals are to conduct themselves with the greatest care and righteousness including seeking repentance when they err and being gracious when praised. In this case, it is the individual who holds authority over himself and controls his actions, words and thoughts.

The governance of the family includes managing the welfare of one’s household and dependants. This includes instilling good characteristics and values and reprimanding those when they err. In this case, the head of the family holds authority.

The governance of generality is managing the welfare and protection of people in the cities. The holder of authority is he who governs the cities and provinces. This means taking care of their livelihood and ‘preventing them from reprehensible morals and bad deeds’(p.61).

Governance of generality also means punishing those who err and praising those who do well. It also includes protecting and governing affairs of a religious nature and the hereafter. It is the attributes in this type of authority that can be found nowhere in the



world ‘except in the *imams* from the family of Prophet Muhammad’(p.61).

Philosophers agree that he who cannot manage or govern himself or the individual should not govern the family. Additionally, he who cannot govern his family and dependants does not possess the right to govern the general populace. Scholars however do not have this qualification.

#### *Teaching*

Following on from governance, Al-Naysaburi examines the notion that knowledge or speech does not come from nature. People are ignorant at the time of their birth. The proof for this is that if knowledge and speech came naturally then people would not need teaching and would be born scholars. However, ‘people do need teaching, one learning from the other until they reach the one who has had no teaching from anyone but who received it through inspiration, not through teaching’(p.62). This argument suggests that it is the *imam* who possesses the divine knowledge and is at a degree of excellence higher than humankind. Furthermore, God

gave the prophets and the *imams* this bounty of knowledge so that they may teach humankind, giving them wisdom and knowledge to guide them on their path to the truth.

#### *Necessity of the Imam*

This theme is covered primarily in section seven of the *Kitab* but also appears in other sections. Al-Naysaburi uses past cycles to further his argument that ‘there has never been a period of time that has been deprived of a true *imam* to whom obedience is obligatory’ (p.76).

In the story of Noah and the ark, for example, the prophet (Noah) summons all people to the ark to seek refuge and protection. The ark is none other than the *imam* and Noah is inviting the people to the *imam*. Another example can be seen during the life of Abraham. Abraham glorified the fire which ‘was an indication for the glorification of the light of the *imamat*’ (p.79). There was also the glorification of the Ka‘ba indicating that ‘the *imamat* was to be in Abraham’s house and progeny’ (p.79). Finally, when Prophet



Figure II: Al-Hakim Mosque, Cairo, Egypt. © Archnet



Muhammad, the seal of the prophets, came along, he changed the direction of prayer to the Ka'ba (as previously the direction of prayer was to Jerusalem) indicating that the 'imamat had returned to the children of Isma'il who are the children of Prophet Muhammad' (p.79). This leads our author to ask pertinently why *imams* from all prophetic periods were accepted but the same was denied in the family of Prophet Muhammad?

**Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah:** Abu 'Ali Mansur, the sixth Fatimid caliph and 16th Ismaili *imam* (r. 996-1021 CE) was born in 985, and succeeded his father Imam-Caliph Al - 'Aziz (r. 975-96 CE) at the age of 11 with the caliphal title of al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah. The first Fatimid ruler to have been born in Egypt, Hakim had been proclaimed as heir-apparent (*wali al-'ahd*) in 993 CE on the death of his elder (and sole) brother Muhammad.

*The graciousness of the Lord of the Age and Time (wali al-asr wa zaman) – Al-Hakim*

The lord of the age and time is inspired by the magnanimous nature of Allah in terms of his bounty. God showers endless bounty on humankind but, humankind is not capable of offering gratitude equal to that bounty. However, God forgives them and is content with them praising Him. This is similarly applied to al-Hakim, as the benefactor. His followers should not concede defeat in their inability to offer enough gratitude and should do so to their capacity. This demonstrates the lord of the age and time emulating God's graciousness.

Al-Naysaburi furthers this thought by claiming that the commander of the faithful, the imam, al-Hakim, follows 'God's actions towards humanity, follows God's command and adopts His manners' (p.88). God 'bestows his bounty on both the believers and unbelievers' and likewise, al-Hakim 'bestows worldly benefit on the Muslims and the unbelievers and denies it to them too' (p.89). This is to ensure that belief was to God and the benefits of this belief are far reaching in this world and in the hereafter. Just as God looks at the people with a merciful eye, al-

Hakim as the lord of the age and time looks past the imperfections and disobedience and exudes mercy. Moreover, God gives to the simpleton and the ignorant, the learned and the intelligent alike. Giving only to the learned and intelligent would not only leave the ignorant and simpleton in despair, but the acquisition of knowledge would then only be for the sake of this world. Al-Naysaburi's treatise clearly demonstrates God's parity with his people 'in order that everyone may obtain their fair share of His bounty and kindness' (p.90).

Moreover, Al-Naysaburi explains that just as humans tolerate hurt and pain from their own children as well as from animals, the *imam* tolerates the bad conduct, pain and hardship of the people. The *imam* is there to protect the welfare of the ignorant and hopes that they return to salvation through his guidance and enlightenment. He looks upon humankind, even with their bad conduct, solely through the eye of mercy thereby demonstrating his grace and kindness. Al-Naysaburi ends his treatise, as was customary at the time, by seeking from God to bestow His grace on humankind. Just as he began this treatise with a praise and prayer to God, he ends by praising God and seeking blessings.

*Kitab Ithbat al-Imama* is a valuable contribution to Ismaili scholarship and would be of interest to readers who wish to explore Shi'i perspectives on the notion of leadership and authority in Islam.

### Passages of Relevance

#### Guidance

Section 6 – page 62

'We also say that since people are ignorant at the time of their birth, having no knowledge, and as knowledge does not come to them from nature, nor does speech, [therefore] they need teaching. The proof that knowledge does not come forth from nature is that if knowledge did come from nature, then people would naturally be scholars and be able to speak naturally...'





Section 6 – page 62-63

‘People, [therefore], do need teaching, one learning from the other until they reach the one who has had no teaching from the other but who received it through inspiration, not through teaching. This deficiency in people and their need for teaching necessitates a teacher, which in turn necessitates an ultimate end for the teachers, that is, Prophet Muhammad and the *imam*, peace be upon them. That is among the convincing proofs for the confirmation of the *imamat* and the messengership.’

Section 6 – page 63

‘Thus, when God inspired prophets and *imams* giving them wisdom and knowledge, they [in turn] informed mankind, explaining to them their guidance and their path to the Truth...’

#### Questions To Consider

1. What is the value of a teacher and how is the role of a teacher in a religious context different from that of a teacher in a secular context?

#### *Knowledge as a reflection of faith*

Section 7 – page 81

‘As for piety (*taqwa*)... where there is no knowledge, there can be no piety, for piety comes through knowledge, when one knows what belongs to him and what [belongs] to others’

Section 6 – page 51

‘So when the *imam* undertakes the charge, he is endowed with additional spirits as well as powers and purity that no ordinary human being possesses. Thus, the pinnacle of purity in the human animal is combined in the *imam* along with the subtlety and refinement of nature. The peak of the sensuous animals,

their choicest parts, the furthest felicity of the celestial spheres, the balance of nature and the subtlest influence of the entire celestial spheres and stars, are so combined that he [the *imam*] becomes the quintessence of the whole world.’

1. What sort of knowledge is the *Ithbat* speaking about? How can one seek this knowledge?
2. How does seeking knowledge allow us to better understand the *imam* and thereby facilitate a stronger connection to the divine?
3. Why is seeking this knowledge important not only for this life but also the life hereafter?
4. How are divine intellect and human intellect inter-connected?

#### *The Ethic of Gratitude*

Section 7 – page 94

‘We ask God to bestow upon us gratitude for what he has blessed us with in words, deeds and in intention, and that He grants us success in obedience to the lord of the age and time (wali al-‘asr wa’l-zaman), peace be upon him. May He provide us with the means of struggling on his behalf with our hands, tongues and hearts.’

Section 7 – p.84

‘...whenever gratitude to a benefactor is incumbent on them, and they are unable to express gratitude equal to the bounty, they should do so according to their capacity and should not relinquish giving thanks...’

Section 7 – page 88

‘...God by His bounty bestows blessings upon people, be they pious or impious, believers or unbelievers.’

1. How does understanding the nature

“I constantly have been reminded that we were touching the very foundations of my ancestors, the Fatimids, and the pluralistic history and intellectual profile of this city and this country to which they contributed so profoundly.”

Speech by His Highness the Aga Khan  
Inauguration of Al-Azhar Park ,Cairo, Egypt  
25 March 2005



- of gratitude foster a sense of connectedness to humanity and also to Allah?
2. What is the value of gratitude in faith traditions? In what ways are faith and gratitude interconnected?

The universal sentiment of gratitude is shared by humanity and especially by most faith traditions. Gratitude can provide a common language to engage in a dialogue across people and traditions as it is not limited to faith or to religious people. Gratitude allows us to remember the bounty bestowed upon us and encourages us to engage in a spirit of generosity toward humanity.

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