



A Comparative Study of Henri Corbin's and Allameh Tabataba'i's Views on the Perfect Human and the Imam of the Age (May God Hasten His Reappearance)

Rajab Akbarzadeh¹, Seyed Amir Sekhavatian²

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Abstract

The present study aims to elucidate and analyze the causal differences between the perspectives of Henri Corbin, the French philosopher, and Allameh Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i at three interrelated levels: ontology, epistemology, and teleology. From an ontological perspective, Corbin understands the Imam as a manifestation of a luminous reality within the imaginal realm (*'ālam al-mithāl*), transcending ordinary historical temporality. Allameh Tabataba'i, by contrast, particularly in *al-Mīzān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, conceives of the Imam as an ontological reality and a manifestation of divine grace operating across the levels of being and throughout history. At the epistemological level, Corbin regards knowledge of the Imam as primarily intuitive and esoteric, whereas Allameh Tabataba'i, in *al-Mīzān*, understands such knowledge as involving an interplay of reason, transmitted revelation, and spiritual vision. From a teleological perspective, Corbin emphasizes the spiritual continuity of the Imam during the occultation and maintains that the Imam remains inwardly and esoterically present in the world. Allameh Tabataba'i, however, understands the Imam as an indispensable source of both ontological and legislative guidance in every age.

Furthermore, in *al-Mīzān*, Allameh Tabataba'i, in contrast to approaches that are predominantly esoteric—such as Corbin's tendency to locate the Imam primarily within the imaginal realm—emphasizes the inseparable relationship between the unseen (*ghayb*) and the visible (*shahādah*) realms. From the perspective of *al-Mīzān*, the Imam constitutes the link between the sacred realm and the human world and serves as a guarantor of the continuity of revealed law and practical guidance within society and history. Taken as a whole, these differences reveal two distinct approaches to the relationship between the human being and the sacred, as well as to the manner in which the sacred becomes manifest within the human world. These differing approaches

1. Assistant Professor, Department of Islamic, Payam Noor University, Tehran, Iran (**Corresponding Author**). r_akbarzadeh@pnu.ac.ir

2. Assistant Professor, Department of Islamic Studies, Qo.C, Islamic Azad University, Qom, Iran. sekhavatian@iau.ac.ir



have significant implications for the interpretation of religious and philosophical traditions.

The present study collects its data through library-based research and analyzes them using a descriptive-analytical method. Future research may further examine each of the constituent components identified within the two perspectives in greater conceptual and comparative depth.

Keywords: Mystical Ontology; Esoteric Epistemology; Ontological Imamate; Qur’anic Hermeneutics; Legislative Authority (*Wilāyah Tashrī‘iyyah*).

Introduction

The concept of the Perfect Human (*al-insān al-kāmil*) has long occupied a distinctive position in Islamic philosophy and Shi'i mysticism. In this context, Henri Corbin, the French philosopher and Orientalist, through his extensive studies of Islamic mysticism and, in particular, his close intellectual engagement with Allameh Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, developed a distinctive interpretation of the concepts of the Imam and the Perfect Human (Corbin, 2007, p. 121). Allameh Tabataba'i, on the other hand, as a prominent Shi'i philosopher, particularly in works such as *al-Mizān fī Tafṣīr al-Qur'ān*, maintains—in his interpretation of Qur'an 2:124, for example—that the office of the Imamate belongs to those souls capable of attaining perfection and free from injustice; whoever attains perfection becomes an Imam and a guide for society (Tabataba'i, 2014, Vol. 1, p. 272). Grounded in the principles of Islamic philosophy, he develops a comprehensive and profound understanding of these concepts.

The central challenge in comparing the perspectives of these two thinkers is whether Corbin succeeded in understanding the concept of the Imam without removing it from the framework of Qur'anic-Shi'i ontological authority (*wilāyah takwīniyyah*) and reducing it to a mere phenomenology of the symbol. Within Shi'i thought, the Imam is understood as a mediator of divine grace and as an ontological and spiritual reality situated within the various degrees of being. Corbin, by contrast, tends to interpret the Imam primarily as a luminous and metaphysical reality within the imaginal realm (*'ālam al-mithāl*), accessible through the process of mystical realization. The resulting difference in their conceptions of the Imam's role within the ontological and epistemic orders constitutes the central point of departure for the present study.

The significance of this research lies in the fact that, within the current state of scholarship, a comparative examination of these perspectives can contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between the human being and the Imam in Shi'i philosophy, as well as of the cultural and intellectual interactions between Islamic and Western thought. Analyzing the fundamental differences between Corbin's and Allameh Tabataba'i's interpretations of the concepts of the Imam and the Perfect Human not only clarifies our understanding of *wilāyah* and the Imamate in Shi'ism but also enables a more precise assessment of the place of these concepts in encounters with modern challenges and contemporary phenomenological approaches. In terms of its nature, the present study is fundamental and theoretical, while methodologically it adopts a descriptive-analytical approach with a comparative framework.

Among the previous studies relevant to this subject is the work *Shi'ism: Dialogues and Correspondence between Henri Corbin and Allameh Tabataba'i*,

as well as the research of Dr. Seyyed Javad Miri. The latter has examined these two thinkers comparatively in several books and articles. In recent years, a number of studies have also been published in scholarly journals, including the article entitled “Imamate and Wilāyah in the Thought of Allameh Tabataba’i and the Phenomenology of Henri Corbin.”

The principal problem addressed by this study is that, although both thinkers emphasize the necessity of the Imam’s existence and the continuity of *wilāyah*, their ontological and epistemological foundations contain subtle but consequential differences. These differences lead to distinct conceptions of the Imam’s presence during the Occultation and of the manner in which humanity is guided. Corbin emphasizes the Imam’s transhistorical and luminous dimension, whereas Allameh Tabataba’i, while acknowledging the unseen dimension of the Imam, insists upon the Imam’s objective reality within the degrees of being and upon the necessary interrelationship between the unseen (*ghayb*) and the visible (*shahādah*) realms.

Accordingly, employing a descriptive-analytical method, this study seeks to answer the following question: What are the fundamental differences between the views of Henri Corbin and Allameh Tabataba’i concerning the Perfect Human and the Imam of the Age (may God hasten his reappearance), and how do these differences affect the teleological understanding of the Imam’s mission and function in the world?

1. Conceptual Clarification

Conceptual clarification, through the precise definition of terms, reduces ambiguity in humanistic analysis and provides a theoretical basis for operationalizing variables. It is essential for maintaining logical coherence and scholarly validity and for establishing a shared understanding between the researcher and the reader. In the present study, two key terms require particular clarification in order to establish such a common conceptual framework. These are as follows:

1.1. The Concept of the Imam

The term *Imam* derives from the Arabic root *’amma*, meaning “to intend,” “to head toward,” or “to precede,” and is lexically used in the sense of leader, guide, and exemplar (al-Turāḥ, 1375, Vol. 1, p. 110; Ibn Manẓūr, 1414, Vol. 12, p. 25). Technically, the Imam is understood as one who occupies the rank of divine vicegerency, functions as an intermediary of divine grace between the Creator and creation, and is appointed by divine command (Fāḍil al-Miqdād al-Siyūrī, 1405, p. 325; al-‘Allāmah al-Ḥillī, 1365, p. 66).

In his Qur’anic exegesis, and particularly in *al-Mīzān fī Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*,

Allameh Tabataba'i conceptualizes the Imam not merely in lexical and terminological terms but also from philosophical and theological perspectives. In Tabataba'i's thought, the Imam, in addition to possessing human and social characteristics, is understood as an infallible being endowed with divinely granted knowledge. The Imam surpasses other human beings in all relevant dimensions, and his existence is regarded as necessary for the continuity of divine grace within the order of being. This conception becomes particularly evident in his interpretation of Qur'an 2:30: "*And when your Lord said to the angels, 'Indeed, I am going to place upon the earth a vicegerent'*". Here, the Imam is understood in the broader paradigm of divine vicegerency on earth, and his role in the continuation of divine grace is elucidated (Tabataba'i, 1393, Vol. 1, p. 276). In Tabataba'i's view, the Imam, as an intermediary of divine grace between the Creator and creation, ensures the continuity of both divine effusion and guidance within the world.

According to Tabataba'i, the Imam in the Qur'an is particularly represented through the concept of the *Imām Mubīn* in the verse, "*And We made them Imams guiding by Our command*" (Qur'an 21:73), which he interprets specifically in relation to esoteric authority and spiritual Imamate (Tabataba'i, 1393, Vol. 1, p. 267). In Tabataba'i's interpretation, *al-amr* ("the command") refers to the Realm of Command (*'ālam al-amr*), that is, the *malakūt* or suprasensible dimension of existence. The *Imām Mubīn*, therefore, is not merely an outward guide for human beings; rather, according to Tabataba'i, the Imam also guides human beings inwardly and spiritually toward divine perfection. This interpretation places particular emphasis on the spiritual and mystical dimension of the Imamate: the Imam is not merely a social leader but a reality that transcends this function and has a presence within the spiritual and esoteric dimensions of human existence.

In this connection, Tabataba'i emphasizes the tradition, "*If only two people remained on earth, one of them would necessarily be the ḥujjah*", which indicates the necessity of the existence of an Imam for the continuity of the cosmic order and the preservation of divine grace. On the basis of this tradition, the Imam does not function solely as a political leader but also as an ontological and metaphysical reality within the order of existence. In *al-Mizān*, Allameh Tabataba'i explains this notion even more explicitly, describing the Imam, as God's *ḥujjah* (divine proof), as an intermediary of ontological divine grace (*fayḍ takwīnī*), without whom the created order would be deprived of its divinely established balance and order (Tabataba'i, 1393, Vol. 13, p. 208).

In Allameh Tabataba'i's conception of the Imam, particularly as articulated in *al-Mizān*, the Imam is a being who participates directly in guiding human beings toward divine perfection at both the ontological (*takwīnī*) and legislative

(*tashrīʿ*) levels. The Imam therefore plays a fundamental role not only in preserving the revealed law and providing social guidance but also in ensuring the continuity of divine grace within the order of existence. As transmitted in the tradition: “*If only two people remained on earth, one of them would necessarily be the ḥujjah*” (al-Kulaynī, 1407, Vol. 1, p. 254).

A similar understanding can be found in the philosophical works of Muslim thinkers such as Avicenna and Mullā Ṣadrā, where the Imamate is likewise associated with the fundamental structure of existence and the Imam is conceptualized as an active intellect and an intermediary of divine grace within the cosmos (Avicenna, 1404, p. 502; Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī, 1981, Vol. 5, p. 342). As a manifestation of ontological divine authority (*wilāyah takwīniyyah*), the Imam continuously sustains the world under divine guidance and thereby mediates the flow of divine grace at the levels of being and nature.

Accordingly, the present author argues that any adequate account of the concept of the Imam in Allameh Tabatabaʿī's thought must recognize that the Imam's role is not confined to the visible and historical world. Rather, at a level transcending ordinary historical temporality, the Imam functions as a divine and metaphysical reality that preserves and perpetuates spiritual and esoteric truths. The Imam is therefore understood as an enduring reality appointed by God in every age and in every place to fulfill his function of guidance and mediation of divine grace within the created order.

1.2. The Concept of the Perfect Human

The concept of the Perfect Human (*al-insān al-kāmil*) occupies a highly significant position in Islamic mysticism. From this perspective, the Perfect Human is one who has traversed the stages of human perfection, attained the rank of *khalīfat Allāh* (God's vicegerent), and become a manifestation of the Divine Supreme Name. As the one who encompasses all levels of existence, the Perfect Human is regarded as an intermediary between the Divine Reality and creation (Ibn ʿArabi, 1380, p. 81). This concept refers not only to the spiritual and mystical dimensions of human existence but also has significant political and social implications within Islamic philosophy, particularly in Shiʿi thought. In Islamic mysticism, the Perfect Human, endowed with ontological and legislative *wilāyah*, divinely bestowed knowledge (*ʿilm ladunnī*), esoteric vision, and a degree of spiritual influence over existence, is regarded as the most complete manifestation of divine attributes within the created order.

Within Shiʿi thought, the Perfect Human is identified with the infallible Imam who assumes the leadership of the people. This leadership is not merely formal or institutional in the sense of calling people to faith and disseminating religious teachings; rather, it involves a form of spiritual attraction and magnetic

influence (*kashsh wa jazb*). (Allameh Tabataba'i, 1382, p. 62). In his Qur'anic exegesis, Allameh Tabataba'i regards the Imam as a manifestation of the Divine Supreme Name and as the point of connection between the realms of *mulk* and *malakūt*. From his perspective, the infallible Imam is not merely the custodian of religious law and the complete representative of the religion; rather, he is also established by divine command within the order of existence and serves as the spiritual guide of human beings in all dimensions (Tabataba'i, 1393, Vol. 1, p. 85).

This conception is articulated within the framework of Allameh Tabataba'i's philosophy of the primacy of existence (*aṣālat al-wujūd*). According to this philosophical perspective, the Imam, as the complete and comprehensive manifestation of the degrees of existence, occupies a level beyond that of ordinary human beings and functions, in reality, as an intermediary between the material realm (*mulk*) and the spiritual realm (*malakūt*). As an ontological reality and a guide who opens the way for human beings toward perfection, the Imam occupies the position of the ultimate and complete reality within the order of being.

Allameh Tabataba'i, particularly in *al-Mīzān*, emphasizes that the Imam, in his capacity as the divine *ḥujjah*, fulfills the role of God's vicegerent on earth, as indicated in Qur'an 2:30: "*And when your Lord said to the angels, 'Indeed, I am going to place upon the earth a vicegerent.'*" His existence is regarded as necessary for the continuity of divine grace within the created order. Allameh presents this verse as a Qur'anic foundation for the Shi'i conception of the Perfect Human and the Imamate and maintains that the infallible Imam is the very vicegerent of God whose role in preserving and transmitting divine grace within the world is unique and indispensable (Tabataba'i, 1393, Vol. 1, p. 276).

In Allameh's perspective, the Imam, as the "point of connection" between the realms of *mulk* and *malakūt*, is conceptualized within his philosophical and mystical framework as a being who occupies a level beyond ordinary material and conventional existence. In this understanding, the Imam is present not only within the sensible realm but also within the spiritual and esoteric dimensions of reality, which is why he is described as a "point of connection." This status of the Imam, in Allameh Tabataba'i's thought, is presented—on the basis of the gradations of existence and the philosophy of the primacy of existence—as an indispensable reality within the order of being and as a means of guiding human beings toward divine perfection (Tabataba'i, 1393, Vol. 13, p. 274).

From a political and social perspective, this conception demonstrates that the Imamate in Shi'ism is not merely a spiritual or epistemic office but also a guiding and ordering institution for collective human life. Within this framework, the Imam constitutes a source of legitimacy for social order and, by integrating

justice, truth, and guidance, redirects society from the short-term interests of worldly centers of power toward a divine teleological horizon. The Imamate therefore plays an active role in regulating relations of power, resisting injustice, and preserving the moral and religious coherence of society. The presence of the Imam in Shi'i thought thus signifies the continuity of divine supervision over history and society, preventing religion from being reduced to an exclusively private or ritual sphere. Consequently, the Imam is both a spiritual leader and a model of the pursuit of justice and social order, and the realization of the ideal Shi'i society is understood as dependent upon connection with this divinely ordained station.

Henri Corbin, the French philosopher, also discusses the concept of the Perfect Human in his works. Corbin regards the Perfect Human as a luminous substance and a living reality manifested in the Shi'i Imam, particularly in Imam al-Mahdi (may God hasten his reappearance) (Corbin, 1396, p. 165). This conception differs in several respects from the traditional Islamic mystical understanding represented by Ibn 'Arabi. Whereas Ibn 'Arabi conceives of the Perfect Human as a comprehensive being encompassing all levels of existence and manifesting across the various degrees of being, Corbin tends to situate the concept more strongly within the imaginal realm and the sphere of symbolic hermeneutics.

Corbin maintains that the Perfect Human manifests within the imaginal realm and at the level of esoteric interpretation and, as a luminous reality, occupies a supranatural level of existence. From Corbin's perspective, the Shi'i Imam—particularly Imam al-Mahdi (may God hasten his reappearance)—constitutes the locus of manifestation of the Perfect Human. Yet this manifestation is primarily apprehended within the domain of esoteric phenomenology, and more specifically within the imaginal and spiritual realm, rather than through the ontological and social dimensions emphasized in Shi'i thought and in Allameh Tabataba'i's philosophy (Corbin, 1396, p. 165).

These differences between Allameh Tabataba'i and Corbin regarding the Perfect Human and the Imam reveal two distinct approaches to the concepts of the Imamate and *wilāyah*. At the same time, when these approaches are examined philosophically and mystically, particularly with regard to their political and social implications, they become even more complex. For example, they may lead to two different models of Shi'i political agency: dynamic expectation on the one hand and esoteric expectation on the other.

1.3. The Relationship between the Imam and the Perfect Human

In Islamic philosophy and Shi'i mysticism, the infallible Imam and the Perfect Human occupy essentially the same ontological level and may, in

general, be understood as two expressions of a single reality. From Allameh Tabataba'i's perspective, the Imam is not merely a Perfect Human who has traversed all stages of human perfection; he also possesses ontological *wilāyah*. The Imam's ontological *wilāyah*, which arises from the perfection of his soul, means that he functions as an intermediary of divine grace within the order of existence and that his presence is necessary for the continuity of divine effusion and the preservation of the cosmic order (Tabataba'i, 1393, Vol. 1, p. 184).

According to Allameh Tabataba'i, the Imam's ontological *wilāyah*, as a source and manifestation of the continuity of divine grace, exercises influence not only in the spiritual domain but across all levels of existence. Within this framework, the Imam's ontological *wilāyah* is directly connected with his legislative *wilāyah*, because the Imam is the person most fully aware of the genuine interests of society and the executor of divine commandments. Legislative *wilāyah*—that is, the right to exercise political authority—is therefore regarded as a consequence of the Imam's ontological *wilāyah* and infallibility.

Accordingly, the Imam, as the *walī al-amr* (holder of divinely sanctioned authority) and God's vicegerent on earth, retains the legitimacy of political authority through his ontological *wilāyah* even when he is outwardly absent from society. This indicates that, in Shi'i thought, the Imam plays a fundamental role not only at the spiritual and esoteric levels but also at the political and social levels in guiding the Islamic community. From the Shi'i perspective, there exists a Perfect Human in every age who exercises a form of unseen influence over the world and humanity, oversees spirits, souls, and hearts, and possesses a form of ontological authority over the world and human beings (Mosallai Pour Yazdi & Kordelouei, 1390, p. 148).

Henri Corbin, influenced by Shi'i spiritual visions and by his intellectual exchanges with Allameh Tabataba'i, came to regard the Imam as a living and present Perfect Human within existence, whose presence continues in every age, even during the period of occultation. Corbin emphasizes that Shi'ism is the only intellectual tradition that continuously preserves the relationship between the human being and God through the living presence of the Imam and thereby prevents religion from becoming entirely historicized and secularized (Corbin, 1396, p. 168). From Corbin's perspective, the Imam is not only the Perfect Human but also the symbol and guarantor of the survival of spirituality and esoteric knowledge in the modern age (Corbin, 1396, p. 175).

2. Examination of the Views of Henri Corbin and Allameh Tabataba'i

The present study seeks to examine, from a comparative perspective, the views of Henri Corbin and Allameh Tabataba'i concerning the concepts of the

Perfect Human and the Imam. The principal objective is to elucidate the theoretical convergences and distinctions between these two thinkers in their analyses of the ontological and epistemological status of these two stations, thereby bringing to light both the common ground and the distinctive dimensions of each perspective.

The principal themes in Henri Corbin's thought concerning the Imam, the Perfect Human, and the Imam of the Age (may God hasten his reappearance) may be outlined as follows:

2.1. The Status of the Imam in Corbin's Thought

Within Shi'i thought, Henri Corbin understands the Imam as a manifestation of sacred reality and as an intermediary between the divine realm and the human world. From Corbin's perspective, the Imam is a manifestation of the Perfect Human and the bearer of the Muhammadan Reality (*al-ḥaqīqah al-Muḥammadiyah*), which, like a prophetic light, continues through the Imams and enables human beings to undertake a spiritual journey toward the realm of meaning (Corbin, 1389, p. 72). This perspective stands in significant contrast to predominant Sunni conceptions of the Imam, in which the Imam is primarily understood as a political office.

Corbin maintains that, in Shi'ism, the Imam is not merely the authentic interpreter of the Qur'an but also the manifestation of *wilāyah* and the guide of the spiritual journey. In other words, the Imam's function is not limited to social guidance; it also encompasses the inward and spiritual guidance of human beings on their path toward perfection. From Corbin's perspective, the Imamate constitutes a form of "esoteric prophethood" that continues, after the termination of prophethood, in the form of *wilāyah* (Corbin, 1389, p. 135).

This point also has important political implications, as it entails a serious critique of Islamic nation-states in which religion becomes explicitly politicized and spiritual concepts become closely entangled with worldly politics and structures of power. In Corbin's thought, the Imam's *wilāyah*, as a sacred reality within the order of existence, stands in tension with worldly politics and power-oriented ideologies. This distinction clarifies the fundamental difference, in his view, between the Shi'i Imam and the Sunni caliph.

In his ontological analysis of the Imam, Corbin further draws upon the concepts of Illuminationist philosophy (*ḥikmat al-ishrāq*) and maintains that the Imam occupies a level beyond ordinary history and material existence. Thus, even when the Imam is historically absent—as in the case of Imam al-Mahdi—he continues to play a role in human existence and guidance within the imaginal and esoteric realm (Corbin, 1389, p. 221). For Corbin, the Imam's "transhistorical" character has profound implications for Shi'i political agency. In contrast to

politically activist interpretations, such as the perspective associated here with Allameh Tabataba'i, which emphasizes the Imam's ontological and legislative *wilāyah* in preserving the legitimacy of political authority and the social responsibilities of the Shi'i community, Corbin places greater emphasis on the Imam's inward role within the imaginal realm and on the non-dependence of Shi'is upon worldly political concerns.

Ultimately, Corbin regards knowledge of the Imam not as something attained exclusively through rational or transmitted knowledge, but as an intuitive and experiential mode of knowledge (*shuhūdī wa dhawqī*) (Corbin, 1989, p. 45), acquired through spiritual discipline, mystical unveiling, and direct contemplative experience. In other words, he maintains that knowledge of the Imam is attained through mystical vision and therefore characterizes Shi'ism as perhaps the most mystically oriented form of Islam (Corbin, 1389, p. 45).

This emphasis on mystical intuition and spiritual experience generates significant epistemological differences when compared with Allameh Tabataba'i's position, in which reason, alongside mystical vision and immediate knowledge (*'ilm ḥudūrī*), constitutes an essential means of cognition. The distinction between Allameh and Corbin therefore does not lie in the "elimination of reason," but rather in Allameh's broader methodological synthesis—the integration of demonstration, the Qur'an, and mysticism—in contrast to Corbin's more concentrated emphasis on esoteric phenomenology.

2.2. The Perfect Human in Corbin's Thought

Henri Corbin conceptualizes the Perfect Human as a sacred reality and an intermediary between the material realm and the realm of meaning. He maintains that the Perfect Human is a manifestation of the Muhammadan Reality, which continues through the Shi'i Imams and enables human beings to undertake a spiritual journey toward the realm of meaning (Corbin, 1390, p. 67). The Perfect Human is a manifestation of the Divine Names and bears spiritual *wilāyah*, occupying a central position within the order of existence through which the cosmos acquires meaning (Corbin, 1379b, p. 53).

Corbin generally distinguishes between prophethood, which possesses a legislative dimension and has come to an end, and *wilāyah*, which possesses an inward and esoteric dimension and continues. Within his intellectual framework, which is consistent with the premises of his phenomenological approach, the Imam functions as the "interpreter of the sacred law" rather than its "legislator or executor" in the outward juridical sense (Corbin, 1385, p. 115). Accordingly, through spiritual *wilāyah*, the Imam assumes responsibility for the inward guidance of human beings.

A political and social analysis of Corbin's position, particularly in relation to

the Sunni caliph, reveals a significant critique of Islamic nation-states and the process of politicization of religion. In Corbin's thought, the infallible Imam is not merely a political leader but a metaphysical reality through whom the relationship between humanity and God is maintained by means of the living presence of the Imam, thereby preventing religion from becoming secularized and historicized (Corbin, 1382, p. 125).

Corbin's position may consequently be understood as a critique of Shi'i political institutionalization, particularly in historical contexts in which Shi'i movements have sought to establish political governments. By emphasizing the Imam's esoteric interpretation, Corbin challenges the social and political legitimacy claimed by jurists and by literalist political regimes. For Corbin, the infallible Imam, as the "bearer of esoteric knowledge and interpretation," transcends jurisprudence and outward legal formalism. This position highlights the distinction between esoteric hermeneutics and conventional jurisprudence, particularly within Shi'ism during the period of occultation (Corbin, 1387, p. 151). Corbin maintains that during the Imam's occultation, access to the reality of the Imam is possible primarily through inner unveiling and mystical intuition and therefore challenges the exclusive authority of outward institutions and rejects their sufficiency for guiding human beings.

Corbin's position has significant social and political implications. First, his emphasis on "divine gift" as a defining feature of the Perfect Human, particularly in the concept of the Imam, implies that human perfection is attained not through gradual historical development but through a divine and transcendent gift. The logical consequence of this view is a shift in Shi'i priorities from external political agency toward inward spiritual transformation. Perfection and guidance are attained through a spiritual relationship with the infallible Imam and through inner vision within the imaginal realm (Corbin, 1382, p. 123).

The implication of this analysis is a critical distance between Corbin's position and social and political movements that seek to realize perfection and justice through historical and collective action. In this respect, Corbin's conception of the Imam gives priority to spiritual realization over direct historical-political intervention.

Ultimately, Corbin's conception of the Perfect Human and the *wilāyah* of the infallible Imam simultaneously represents a critique of the secularization of religion and of the establishment of political governments. It also reveals significant differences between his interpretation and other Shi'i approaches to the social and political function of the Imam. Corbin emphasizes that, during the period of occultation, the Imam should be understood primarily as an inward and luminous reality. Consequently, political and social legitimacy becomes

increasingly detached from outward institutions such as jurists and political governments.

2.3. The Imam of the Age in Corbin's Thought

Henri Corbin regards the position of the Imam—and particularly that of the Imam of the Age, Imam al-Mahdi (may God hasten his reappearance)—as the central core of Shi'i thought. In his view, understanding the status of the Hidden Imam is essential to a proper understanding of Islamic mysticism and Shi'i wisdom, because this doctrine constitutes a foundational component of the Shi'i worldview and permeates its various spiritual dimensions.

Corbin does not interpret the occultation of Imam al-Mahdi as an ontological interruption of his existence. Rather, he understands it as a form of sacred hiddenness: the Imam remains present in the *mundus imaginalis*, or what Corbin describes as the “eighth clime,” and functions as an intermediary between the human being and the transcendent. This inward presence of the Imam ensures the continuity of spirituality within Shi'ism. Unlike other religions that turn primarily to a deceased prophet or past saints, Shi'is maintain a relationship with a living and present Imam (Corbin, 1379a, p. 211).

Corbin's position has profound political and social implications for Islamic thought. By emphasizing the “continuity of the esoteric interpretation of revelation” and “inward manifestation,” he understands the Imam's occultation not merely as a historical event but as a spiritual condition in which the Imam remains hidden from ordinary perception and can be apprehended only by those engaged in the mystical path (Corbin, 1389, p. 134). This position creates particular complexities when confronted with political interpretations of the Imam during the period of occultation, especially within contemporary Shi'i thought. In Corbin's framework, the Imam is not merely a political leader; rather, he is the locus of a metaphysical reality through which the meaning and esoteric interpretation of the Qur'an and the sacred law are preserved.

By emphasizing that Shi'ism is the only tradition that maintains a living relationship between the human being and God through the living and present Imam, Corbin also advances a strong critique of “state-centered and formalized religion in the Safavid period” and of political movements that attempt to transfer the concept of the Imam from the spiritual sphere into the political sphere. For Corbin, this distinction represents Shi'ism's resistance to the historicization of religion and its reduction to worldly concerns.

In this context, Corbin acknowledges that by preserving the concept of the living Imam—whose spiritual dimension keeps open the channel of communication with the celestial realm—Shi'ism possesses the capacity to revitalize the spiritual life of contemporary humanity and to resist modern

nihilism, which leads to the denial of transcendent reality (Corbin, 1382, p. 175). This point is particularly significant in Corbin's thought because it distinguishes his position sharply from political approaches that seek to employ the Imam as a source of political legitimacy.

Ultimately, in explaining the meaning of "confronting modern nihilism," Corbin makes clear that this struggle does not primarily take place in the social and political spheres but at the spiritual and inward level. In other words, from his perspective, the confrontation requires an inward revolution achieved through spiritual discipline and esoteric interpretation of religion. This constitutes a fundamental difference from socio-political approaches such as that of Allameh Tabataba'i, which place particular emphasis on the objective and social realization of religious teachings. Corbin, by contrast, maintains that during the occultation of the Imam, Shi'is should primarily turn toward the esoteric interpretation of religion and a spiritual relationship with the Imam rather than toward direct political movements.

3. Explicating the Perfect Human in Allameh Tabataba'i's Thought

From Allameh Tabataba'i's perspective, the Perfect Human is the complete manifestation of the Divine Names and Attributes and occupies the station of *khalīfat Allāh* (God's vicegerency). Within this intellectual framework, the infallible Imam is identified with the Perfect Human who, through the actualization of his cognitive and volitional faculties, has attained the summit of servitude, knowledge, and *wilāyah* and has entered the orbit of divine proximity. This conception of the Perfect Human does not remain confined to the spiritual and mystical domains; rather, it carries profound political and social implications that become manifest in the structure of Islamic government and in the political legitimacy of the infallible Imam. From Allameh's perspective, the infallible Imam functions not only as a spiritual guide but also as a bearer of ontological and legislative *wilāyah* within the social sphere. This conception, particularly in its political implications, provides a basis for the legitimacy of Islamic government, which is grounded in the ontological and legislative *wilāyah* of the Imam.

3.1. Ontological Wilāyah and the Basis of the Imam's Legislative Authority

One of the fundamental characteristics of the infallible Imam in Allameh Tabataba'i's philosophy is his ontological *wilāyah* (*wilāyah takwīniyyah*). From Allameh's perspective, the infallible Imam is a divinely authorized *walī* who possesses a form of authority within the order of creation, and through this authority the guidance of creation and the flow of divine grace throughout the world become possible. The Imam's ontological *wilāyah*, as a manifestation of

divine power within the order of being, operates not only at the spiritual level but also has social and political implications.

This ontological *wilāyah* constitutes the foundation of the Imam's legislative *wilāyah* (*wilāyah tashrī'īyyah*), because the infallible Imam, within the domain of legislation and interpretation of revelation, is the authentic interpreter of the Qur'an and the guardian of the sacred law. According to this conception, the infallible Imam exercises authority at the level of ontological reality on the one hand, while on the other, this ontological authority naturally gives rise to his legislative authority to guide the Islamic community in religious and social affairs.

In this context, the Imam's ontological *wilāyah* is articulated as the basis for the legitimacy of his legislative authority within the Shi'i social order. From Allameh Tabataba'i's perspective, just as the infallible Imam exercises authority within the realm of creation and the order of being, he is also responsible within the realm of legislation for interpreting the sacred law and preserving religion. These two dimensions of *wilāyah* are directly connected with the legitimacy of the Imam's government within the Islamic community. Consequently, the Imam's ontological *wilāyah* functions, in effect, as a foundation for his political and social legitimacy.

3.2. The Social and Political Implications of Ontological and Legislative Wilāyah during the Occultation

Given the relationship that Allameh Tabataba'i establishes between the Imam's ontological and legislative *wilāyah*, an important question arises: How can this *wilāyah* continue, during the occultation of the infallible Imam, to contribute to the legitimacy of Islamic government and to the social and political activities of Shi'is?

Although Allameh did not elaborate the detailed theory of *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* (*Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist*) in the terminology and systematic jurisprudential form developed by later scholars, he articulated its foundations in his discussion of religious leadership and social authority (*za'āmah*). This conception derives from the ontological *wilāyah* of the infallible Imam and entails responsibility for guiding the Islamic community and implementing the sacred law.

3.3. Analysis of the Political and Social Implications in Allameh Tabataba'i's Thought

Ultimately, from Allameh Tabataba'i's perspective, the Perfect Human and the infallible Imam possess a distinctive status not only at the spiritual level but also within the social and political order. The Imam's ontological *wilāyah*, as the basis of his legislative *wilāyah*, provides a rationale for the political

authority of the Imam in both the periods of presence and occultation. Within this framework, the Imam continuously functions as a manifestation of divine grace, even when he is physically absent from society.

In this framework, the *walī faqīh* (Islamic jurist as the holder of political authority) assumes responsibility, as the representative of the infallible Imam, for preserving the sacred law and implementing divine ordinances. This is one of the political implications of the Imam's ontological and legislative *wilāyah*: the legitimacy of Islamic government is implicitly and indirectly transmitted through the ontological *wilāyah* of the infallible Imam. Within such a system, the *walī faqīh*, as the successor or representative of the infallible Imam, assumes responsibility for guiding society, while this political legitimacy is explicitly supported by the Imam's ontological authority within the framework of the interpretation and implementation of divine revelation.

In Allameh Tabataba'i's thought, the ontological and legislative *wilāyah* of the infallible Imam are simultaneously interconnected, and together they provide a justification for the social and political dimensions of Islamic government. This relationship between the Imam's ontological and legislative *wilāyah* during the occultation, particularly through the institution of the *walī faqīh*, constitutes a source of legitimacy for the Shi'i political order, within which the *walī faqīh*, as the representative of the infallible Imam, assumes responsibility for the religious and social guidance of the Islamic community. These analyses indicate that the ontological *wilāyah* of the infallible Imam functions not only at the spiritual level but also as a basis for the political and social legitimacy of Islamic government.

3.4. The Imam, the Perfect Human, and the Manifestation of the Divine Names

In Allameh Tabataba'i's philosophy, the infallible Imam is identical with the Perfect Human, who occupies the highest degree of human perfection and constitutes a manifestation of the Divine Names and Attributes. From Allameh's perspective, through the actualization of his cognitive and volitional faculties, the infallible Imam attains the summit of servitude, knowledge, and *wilāyah* and enters the sphere of divine proximity. In other words, in his capacity as the Perfect Human, the infallible Imam is a locus of manifestation of divine reality, and through this status, divine vicegerency on earth is realized through him (Tabataba'i, 1393, Vol. 1, p. 268).

This Perfect Human has attained the highest station not merely epistemically but also at the ontological and legislative levels, a status expressed through the notion of the divinely appointed *walī*. From a political and social perspective, this ontological *wilāyah* is directly connected to the legislative *wilāyah* of the

infallible Imam, enabling the Imam to guide human beings toward the proper path not only in the inward realm but also at the level of society and politics through both ontological and legislative guidance.

3.5. The Ontological and Legislative Wilāyah of the Infallible Imam

In analyzing the status of the infallible Imam, Allameh Tabataba'i distinguishes between ontological and legislative *wilāyah*. The Imam's ontological *wilāyah* refers to his authority over the degrees and levels of existence. As a divinely appointed *walī*, the infallible Imam possesses authority within the ontological order, and through this authority the flow of divine grace throughout creation is sustained. This ontological *wilāyah* operates not only within the spiritual domain but also has implications for the social and political sphere.

According to Allameh, the infallible Imam must be the authentic interpreter of revelation and the guardian of the sacred law and, through legislative *wilāyah*, must guide the Islamic community in all spheres of life (Tabataba'i, *Nihāyat al-Hikmah*, p. 356). In reality, the Imam's ontological *wilāyah* serves as the foundation for the legitimacy of his legislative authority within the Islamic community. Through this ontological *wilāyah*, the Imam provides the very basis for interpreting revelation, preserving the sacred law, and implementing it within society. From Allameh Tabataba'i's perspective, these two dimensions of *wilāyah* are interconnected not only at the spiritual level but also within the political order.

3.6. The Imam's Ontological and Legislative Guidance and Its Political Implications

In Allameh's analyses, the guidance provided by the infallible Imam is not merely guidance through instruction or direction (*hidāyah irshādiyyah*) but also ontological guidance, to which the Qur'an itself alludes. In particular, Qur'an 21:73—"*And We made them Imams, guiding by Our command*"—presents the Imam as an ontological guide who, through his inward *wilāyah*, guides human beings along the path of truth (Tabataba'i, 1393, Vol. 1, p. 270).

This ontological and legislative guidance affects not only the spiritual dimension of human life but also provides direction for the social movement and political responsibilities of Shi'is during the period of occultation.

The Political Dimension of Legislative Guidance

From Allameh Tabataba'i's perspective, the legislative guidance of the infallible Imam ultimately entails the preservation of the sacred law and its correct interpretation within the Islamic community. As the authentic interpreter of revelation, the infallible Imam bears responsibility for preserving the sacred

law. Since the infallible Imam cannot be physically present within society during the period of occultation, the *walī faqīh*, as the representative of the infallible Imam, is responsible for interpreting the sacred law and implementing it within society. From Allameh's perspective, this position provides legitimacy to the *walī faqīh*, and this political and social legitimacy derives from the ontological *wilāyah* of the infallible Imam at the social level.

The Social Dimension of Ontological Guidance

The ontological guidance of the infallible Imam refers to the inward guidance of human beings. Such inward guidance becomes accessible through a spiritual relationship with the Imam and through esoteric perception. During the period of occultation, although the infallible Imam is hidden from ordinary human perception, his ontological guidance remains operative, and Shi'is continue to receive inward guidance through this relationship. This ontological guidance operates simultaneously with the social and political responsibilities of Shi'is toward the realization of their individual and collective human perfection.

Accordingly, during the occultation, Shi'is remain responsible—through their spiritual relationship with and inward orientation toward the Imam—for preserving the sacred law and fulfilling their social and political obligations.

3.7. The Imam's Divinely Bestowed Knowledge and Its Political Implications

Allameh Tabataba'i maintains that the infallible Imam must possess *'ishmah* (infallibility) and remain protected from error, sin, and mistake. This infallibility derives from divine knowledge and the Imam's inward spiritual vision. In particular, the Imam's divinely bestowed knowledge (*'ilm ladunnī*), which refers specifically to divinely granted knowledge enabling the Imam to interpret revelation and guide human beings, occupies an important position in Allameh's political and social analysis (Tabataba'i, 1393, Vol. 1, p. 274).

The Imam's *'ilm ladunnī* has direct implications for his intellectual and political authority. His knowledge not only protects him from deviation and error but also provides the epistemic authority necessary for making sound and accurate decisions in social and political affairs. By virtue of this divinely bestowed knowledge, the infallible Imam possesses the capacity simultaneously to interpret the sacred law correctly and to provide sound social and political guidance.

3.8. The Necessity of the Imam's Existence and Its Socio-Political Implications during the Occultation

One of the fundamental principles in Allameh Tabataba'i's thought is the maxim "the earth is never devoid of a divine proof" (*lā takhlū al-arḍ min ḥujjah*), meaning that the earth can never be without a divine *ḥujjah* (proof or

authoritative divine witness). Even during the occultation of the infallible Imam, the Imam remains present as God's *hujjah* within the order of existence, and his inward guidance continues (Tabataba'i, 1393, Vol. 1, p. 269).

This belief has a significant role in generating social hope and political resistance within Shi'i society. In particular, the conviction that the infallible Imam remains present in every age and continues to guide the community through inward guidance encourages Shi'is, even under conditions of hardship and occultation, to strive continually for the realization of justice and the preservation of the sacred law. This belief not only strengthens Shi'i resistance to oppression and corruption but also serves as a response to political passivity during the period of occultation.

Accordingly, the doctrine of the necessity of the Imam's existence during occultation has particular significance within Shi'i political philosophy and provides a foundation for legitimizing religious and juridical institutions whose authority is exercised through the *walī faqīh* during the occultation.

Ultimately, within Allameh Tabataba'i's thought, the ontological and legislative *wilāyah* of the infallible Imam operate conjointly as foundations for the legitimacy of Islamic government. This legitimacy is grounded in the Imam's ontological *wilāyah*, through which he exercises authority across the various levels of existence, and is articulated through his legislative *wilāyah*, by which the sacred law is interpreted and preserved. Particularly during the occultation, the *walī faqīh*, as the representative of the infallible Imam, becomes a source of legitimacy for religious institutions and Islamic government within Shi'i society. Within this system, the Imam's inward guidance and divinely bestowed knowledge continue to guide society toward the realization of human and social perfection, even during the period of occultation.

3.9. Comparative Perspectives on the Imam

Both Allameh Tabataba'i and Henri Corbin organize Shi'i ontology around the figure of the Imam and understand the Imam as the central point of connection between the divine realm and the human world. Nevertheless, this philosophical and mystical convergence does not lead to identical political and social conclusions.

The following section first identifies the theoretical similarities between the two thinkers concerning the Imam and then demonstrates how each of these points of convergence gives rise to different implications concerning legitimacy, obligation, expectation, and social organization within the Shi'i tradition and within Corbin's phenomenological interpretation.

4. Similarities

(a) The Imam as the Perfect Human: Corbin regards the Imam as the

complete manifestation of luminous reality and as an intermediary between *malakūt* and *nāsūt*, identifying him with the concept of the Perfect Human in Islamic mysticism—the human being who is both the bearer of divine light and the complete manifestation of the Divine Names within history (Corbin, 1981, p. 56). In this conception, the Imam is not merely a historical figure but rather the “imaginal form of the Perfect Human” who defines the spiritual horizon of human history.

Allameh Tabataba'i likewise, drawing upon Qur'anic verses and transmitted traditions, regards the Imam as the most complete embodiment of the Perfect Human: a being endowed with divine knowledge and infallibility who, as an intermediary of divine grace, constitutes a channel through which goodness and guidance reach creation (Tabataba'i, 1393, Vol. 1, p. 274). In both perspectives, therefore, the Imam is not reduced to the status of a historical ruler but occupies a level above that of ordinary human beings and possesses a distinct spiritual and esoteric station.

From a political and social perspective, understanding the Imam as the Perfect Human establishes a clear boundary between the infallible Imam and any form of historical or political leadership within Shi'i governments, ranging from caliphates to the Safavid state and contemporary political orders. The Imam represents the ultimate standard of legitimacy and perfection, whereas historical rulers—even when they identify themselves as Shi'i—are, at best, incomplete representatives of the sacred law and *wilāyah*. One implication of this conception for political thought is that no political or social leader within Shi'ism can legitimately claim the ontological perfection of the infallible Imam; rather, political legitimacy remains bounded by the *Sharia* and cannot be equated with the Imam's absolute ontological *wilāyah*. Thus, the theory of the Perfect Human, while conferring meaning upon political life, simultaneously prevents the absolute sacralization of historical political power. (b) The Imam's Role in the Inward Guidance of Human Beings:

Corbin refers to the Imam as the “Pole of the world of meaning”, who assumes responsibility for the spiritual and inward guidance of human beings, and emphasizes the continuity of his esoteric *wilāyah* until the end of history (Corbin, 1972, p. 148). Within this interpretation, the Imam's outward occultation does not signify the suspension of guidance; rather, as the spiritual Pole, he maintains his inward presence within the consciousness of believers.

Allameh Tabataba'i likewise regards the Imam as the divine *hujjah* on earth who is responsible for the inward guidance of human beings, even during the period of occultation. From his perspective, without the Imam, human beings would experience disorientation and a rupture in their connection with the source of divine grace on their path toward spiritual perfection (Tabataba'i,

1393, Vol. 1, p. 269). Thus, both thinkers associate genuine guidance less with outward institutions of power than with the human being's relationship to the inward reality of the Imam.

This shared emphasis on the priority of inward guidance over outward domination carries important political and social implications. Within the Shi'i tradition, as interpreted through the broader trajectory of Allameh's thought, the community of believers remains obligated, even in the absence of the infallible Imam's government, to pursue perfection and justice under the guidance of the Imams and through institutions such as religious authority and *marja' iyyah*, rather than remaining indifferent to deviations in historical structures of power.

In Corbin's interpretation, emphasis on the inward Imam nourishes a form of spiritual resistance to Western historicism and modern secularism and prevents Shi'i identity from being reduced to the horizon of modern nation-states. Socially, this shared emphasis can therefore generate a form of political orientation within Shi'ism and an inward mode of resistance to Western historicism in Corbin's account, although the modes and extent of political agency differ substantially between the two perspectives. (c) The Imam's Connection with the Sacred Realm and Ontological *Wilāyah*: In Corbin's view, the Imam possesses an intrinsic connection with the imaginal and *malakūt* realms and constitutes the link between the sensible world and the world of meaning (Corbin, 1993, p. 119). Through his emphasis on the Imam's "luminous *wilāyah*," Corbin is less concerned with institutional structures of political power than with the ontological and inward relationship between the spiritual wayfarer and the Imam.

Within Allameh Tabataba'i's philosophical and exegetical framework, the Imam possesses ontological *wilāyah*—an authority that, by divine permission, enables him to exercise influence within the order of existence and to function as an intermediary of divine grace across the degrees of being (Tabataba'i, 1380, p. 112). In both perspectives, the Imam is understood as a reality transcending ordinary human existence and as being connected with the unseen and *malakūt* realms.

From a political and social perspective, however, Allameh's emphasis on ontological *wilāyah*, particularly in subsequent interpretations of the Shi'i tradition, can provide a basis for a hierarchical structure in which jurists, as legislative deputies of the possessor of ontological *wilāyah*, assume responsibility for governing society during his absence. In other words, this conception may produce a structure in which the Imam occupies the apex of the hierarchy, followed by scholars and jurists regarded as closer to the Imam's truth and therefore as possessing a superior claim to religious guidance and, in some interpretations, to political authority. Such an interpretation, in relation to

historical Shi'i governments, can provide a theoretical basis for doctrines such as the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist (*Wilāyat al-Faqīh*) or a form of privileged religious authority.

Corbin, by contrast, in concentrating on the Imam's luminous and inward *wilāyah*, devotes considerably less attention to the institutional organization of political power. Instead, he tends to envisage a kind of "spiritual community of disciples and wayfarers" organized around the imaginal Imam. Consequently, in his perspective, *wilāyah* leads less toward a hierarchical political structure and more toward a network of inward relationships and a comparatively non-political mode of social organization. (d) The Continuity of the Imam's Existence throughout History:

Drawing upon the principle of inward *wilāyah*, Corbin maintains that the earth is never devoid of a divine *walī*. Even when the Imam is veiled by occultation, he continues, as an inward savior, to preserve the connection between human history and the sacred (Corbin, 1981, p. 203).

Allameh Tabataba'i likewise, on the basis of rational arguments and transmitted traditions, emphasizes the necessity of the existence of a divine *ḥujjah* in every age and maintains that the Imam—whether outwardly manifest or in occultation—remains present within the order of existence as the necessary link between the Creator and creation (Tabataba'i, 1393, Vol. 1, p. 267). Thus, the continuity of the Imam constitutes a condition for the possibility of the continuity of divine guidance and the preservation of the spiritual order of the world.

At the socio-political level, belief in the continuity of the Imam provides Shi'i society with a source of collective hope and historical identity. Even under the rule of oppressive and usurping governments, the Shi'i community does not regard itself as abandoned, because it locates the ultimate reference point of legitimacy and justice in the living and ever-present Imam rather than in the established ruler. This conviction strengthens the collective identity and historical resistance of Shi'is against despotism and political deviation, since the ultimate reference for political legitimacy and social guidance remains the "present divine proof" (*ḥujjah al-hāqir*). Accordingly, the Hidden Imam simultaneously remains the spiritual foundation for resistance to illegitimate power and the guarantor of the enduring horizon of justice throughout history.

5. Differences

(a) The Ontological Foundation of the Imam: Henri Corbin, drawing upon Illuminationist philosophy and Islamic mysticism, approaches the ontology of the Imam as that of a reality transcending the material and historical world. He regards the Imam as a sacred and metaphysical form manifested within

the imaginal realm—the intermediate domain between the sensible and the intelligible—and emphasizes the Imam's luminous reality (Corbin, 1993, p. 78). This perspective presents the Imam primarily as a spiritual and immaterial reality who functions as an intermediary between the unseen realm and the *nāsūt*, or the corporeal human realm.

By contrast, Allameh Tabataba'i approaches the ontology of the Imam from the perspective of the Transcendent Philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā and understands him as a being possessing a distinctive degree of existence within the hierarchy of being and occupying, after the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), a unique ontological station. In this framework, the Imam possesses not only ontological *wilāyah* over the cosmos but also an important role in establishing social and political order (Tabataba'i, 1380, p. 112). Particularly from the perspective of Transcendent Philosophy, this conception underscores the ontological significance of the Imam within the material world and his active influence upon history and society.

The ontological differences between these two perspectives have important political implications. Corbin's conception of the Imam, with its emphasis on his metaphysical and transhistorical character, tends during the period of occultation to diminish the significance of social and political institutions. Within this perspective, the occultation of the Imam entails the absence of sacred legitimacy from political institutions and their consequent reduction to secular functions. In other words, the Imam is understood primarily as a spiritual and esoteric reality that remains independent of the historical and political transformations of the world.

In Allameh Tabataba'i's perspective, however, the Imam, through both ontological and legislative *wilāyah*, continues during occultation to exercise an effective role in preserving social and political order. Occultation does not signify the interruption of *wilāyah*; rather, it underscores the necessity of preserving social order through the Imam's representatives and religious jurists. Accordingly, political responsibility during the occultation falls upon jurists and religious institutions, which are expected to organize social life in accordance with the preservation of the community and the implementation of divine commandments.

(b) The Function and Role of the Imam in the Order of Being: In Corbin's thought, the Imam performs primarily a spiritual and esoteric function. He regards the Imam as the guardian of the "inner dimension of revelation" and the custodian of sacred symbols, who fulfills a role of esoteric instruction throughout history (Corbin, 1981, p. 203). Within this framework, the Imam, as a spiritual teacher and guide, is principally responsible for the inward guidance of human beings and is not understood as directly engaged with worldly

political and social affairs.

By contrast, Allameh Tabataba'i understands the Imam not merely as an interpreter of religion but also as the complete executor of the sacred law, endowed with ontological and legislative *wilāyah* over society and nature (Najjarzadegan, 1390, p. 113). From this perspective, the Imam is necessary not only for the spiritual guidance of human beings but also for the establishment of social and political order and performs multiple functions at both the ontological and legislative levels.

This difference in the Imam's role within the order of being produces divergent political and social implications. Whereas Corbin conceptually separates the Imam from involvement in secular political affairs, Allameh Tabataba'i, by virtue of the Imam's ontological and legislative *wilāyah*, understands him as intrinsically connected with the political and social organization of human life. This, in turn, gives rise to the perceived necessity of establishing Islamic government and the institution of *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist) during the period of occultation.

6. Comparative Perspectives on the Perfect Human

This section adopts a comparative approach to examining the thought of Allameh Tabataba'i and Henri Corbin in order to elucidate the theoretical connections and fundamental differences between the two thinkers by identifying both their points of convergence and divergence.

6.1. Similarities

(a) The Perfect Human as an Intermediary of Divine Grace

Both Corbin and Allameh Tabataba'i conceive of the Perfect Human as an intermediary of divine grace between God and creation. Within the framework of Islamic mysticism and Shi'i teachings, Corbin regards the Perfect Human as the bearer of the Muhammadan Light and a manifestation of the Divine Names who mediates between the realms of *lāhūt* and *nāsūt* (Corbin, 1993, p. 89). In this conception, the Perfect Human, as a sacred reality, performs a vital function in connecting human beings with the unseen realm and with divine blessings.

Allameh Tabataba'i likewise, within the framework of his Transcendent Philosophy, understands the Perfect Human as a being who mediates between the unseen realm and the human world along the descending and ascending arcs of existence and who constitutes a comprehensive manifestation of the Divine Names and Attributes (Tabataba'i, 1380, p. 134). From this perspective, the Perfect Human is not merely a manifestation of the Divine Names but also the connecting link and channel through which divine grace reaches the world.

The political implication of this similarity is that the legitimacy of political and social authority on earth is conditioned, in principle, by conformity with the

authority and guidance of this intermediary of divine grace. At the same time, however, this mediatory function creates the grounds for political divergence: Allameh develops it toward the concept of legislative *wilāyah* and government, whereas Corbin moves toward a critique of historical political power and the relocation of politics to an “inner utopia” or the “eighth clime.” This distinction within an otherwise shared conception of mediation should therefore be given particular emphasis.

(b) The Ontological Comprehensiveness of the Perfect Human

In both perspectives, the Perfect Human is a reality encompassing the various degrees of existence and having attained the highest level of human and spiritual perfection. Corbin describes the Perfect Human as possessing a “between-worlds identity” (*huwiyyat al-bayn al-‘ālamayn*), through which he maintains an active presence in both the material and spiritual realms (Corbin, 1981, p. 66). He understands the Perfect Human as a being fully present in both corporeal and spiritual dimensions and therefore capable of exercising a guiding function in both domains.

Allameh Tabataba'i likewise understands the Perfect Human as a being who, through the integration of theoretical and practical intellect, attains the level of actual intellect and ultimately reaches the station of *fanā' fī Allāh* (annihilation in God). In this conception, the ontological comprehensiveness of the Perfect Human, particularly in its intellectual and spiritual dimensions, gives him the capacity to exercise influence across the various levels of existence and to possess *wilāyah* over them.

The social implication of this comprehensiveness is that no social law or political decree can legitimately supersede the authority of the Imam. This indicates a limitation, in Allameh's perspective, upon the powers of social and political institutions during the period of occultation. Indeed, social authority is fundamentally defined through the Perfect Human, and this comprehensiveness, particularly within religious societies, places constraints upon political institutions and centers of power insofar as they cannot legitimately act in opposition to divine commandments and the *wilāyah* of the Perfect Human.

(c) The Role of the Perfect Human in Inward Guidance

Corbin emphasizes the role of the Perfect Human as the “inward *walī*,” entrusted with guiding souls toward the sacred realm (Corbin, 1981, p. 203). Within this perspective, the Perfect Human is not merely himself a perfected being but also the guide who leads human beings toward spiritual and inward perfection.

Allameh Tabataba'i likewise regards the Perfect Human as the true spiritual guide who, through spiritual insight and mystical *wilāyah*, directs believers along the path of servitude to God (Tabataba'i, 1393, Vol. 1, p. 269). In this

perspective, the Perfect Human possesses not only spiritual characteristics but also a social function: through the general guidance of human beings by means of divine legislation and revealed norms, he extends guidance across all levels of social life.

6.2. Differences

(a) The Ontological Basis of the Perfect Human

Corbin grounds his position in Islamic mysticism, particularly Illuminationist philosophy and the teachings of Suhrawardi. In his conception, the Perfect Human is a reality present within the imaginal realm or intermediate world—the realm situated between the sensible and the intelligible—and this realm constitutes the foundation of inward experience and luminous vision (Corbin, 1972, p. 123). Within this framework, the Perfect Human is perpetually present in the imaginal realm, which transcends ordinary historical and social realities, and his spiritual dimension takes precedence over his objective and historical dimension.

By contrast, Allameh Tabataba'i, drawing upon Transcendent Philosophy, analyzes the Perfect Human within the hierarchy of being, extending from matter to the active intellect (Tabataba'i, 1380, p. 101). In this perspective, the Perfect Human is not merely a spiritual reality but occupies a determinate and objective position within a philosophical ontology, and his presence in the external world and in history is both significant and necessary.

Political analysis: Corbin's ontology of the imaginal realm leads to an understanding of the Imam's *wilāyah* as a fundamentally transhistorical reality that cannot be fully realized within terrestrial political structures and therefore tends to undermine the sacred legitimacy claimed by historical Shi'i governments. According to this approach, worldly politics and structures of power are incapable of fully grasping or actualizing the true reality of the Imam's *wilāyah*. By contrast, Allameh's ontology of Transcendent Philosophy treats the Imam's *wilāyah* as an ontological foundation for the legitimacy of political and social organization, including during the period of occultation. This contrast in political implications leads Allameh to connect the Imam's *wilāyah* more directly with a political and social system capable of being realized within history.

(b) The Epistemic Method for Knowing the Perfect Human

Corbin understands knowledge of the Perfect Human primarily as intuitive, inward, and symbolic, emphasizing that such knowledge is attained chiefly through inner experiences and mystical signs (Corbin, 1993, p. 152). Within this approach, knowledge of the Perfect Human tends naturally to be restricted to a particular group—Sufis, mystics, and spiritual wayfarers—which consequently means that political theories founded upon such knowledge tend to remain at the

individual and mystical level.

By contrast, Allameh Tabataba'i regards knowledge of the Perfect Human as attainable simultaneously through reason, revelation, and mystical intuition and emphasizes that such knowledge rests upon rigorous philosophical and theological analysis (Tabataba'i, 1393, Vol. 1, p. 274). In this view, knowledge of the Perfect Human is accessible not only through spiritual experience but also through rational and transmitted evidence, thereby making possible the articulation of a rationally grounded and defensible social and political system.

Within Corbin's framework, the primacy of intuitive knowledge encourages an individualized and elitist understanding of knowledge of the Imam and, in practice, makes the formulation of a comprehensive and broadly applicable socio-political theory more difficult. Allameh's rational-theological approach, by contrast, provides the methodological basis for developing a social and political system capable of explaining the Imam's position within the social and political order through rational argumentation and intellectual justification.

(c) The Historical and Transhistorical Status of the Perfect Human

Corbin at times detaches his conception of the Perfect Human from its historical context and places greater emphasis on its transhistorical and symbolic dimensions. Within this perspective, the Imam and the Perfect Human are understood not merely as historical figures but as the "primordial form of spiritual reality" (Corbin, 1981, p. 78).

By contrast, Allameh Tabataba'i emphasizes the objective, religious, and social role of the Perfect Human within history and identifies the infallible Imam as the complete embodiment of the Perfect Human in the actual world (Tabataba'i, 1374, Vol. 1, p. 267). This conception enables the Imam to possess a presence not only in the spiritual realm but also within historical and social reality, where he fulfills diverse functions in guiding society.

Corbin's rejection of historicism consequently entails the suspension of the sacred legitimacy of religious political institutions and assumes a critical stance toward Shi'i and Sunni political power alike. By contrast, Allameh's emphasis on the Imam's objective and social role within history generates a form of social and political responsibility for Shi'is which ultimately provides a foundation for theories of active expectation and the establishment of Islamic government during the occultation.

This difference in the conception of social obligation and political agency is therefore crucial. While Corbin's transhistorical and symbolic orientation tends to distance political life from historical structures of power and relocate it within an inward spiritual horizon, Allameh's emphasis on the Imam's objective and social presence connects religious and political responsibility to the historical realization of divine guidance. Ultimately, a comparative analysis of Corbin's

and Allameh Tabataba'i's conceptions of the Perfect Human demonstrates that, whereas Corbin's transhistorical and symbolic orientation distances political life from historical structures of power and tends to relocate politics within an inner utopian horizon, Allameh Tabataba'i, by emphasizing the Imam's objective and social role, connects socio-political systems directly to the *wilāyah* of the Imam and to the necessity of his continuing presence within history. These differences carry significant implications for political theories, particularly with respect to political legitimacy, social organization, and the nature of religious responsibility during the occultation.

Conclusion

A comparative analysis of the thought of Henri Corbin and Allameh Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i demonstrates that, although both thinkers emphasize the central position of the Imam and the Perfect Human within the spiritual order of Islam, their respective approaches and socio-political implications differ profoundly. Both adopt a mystical perspective on the Perfect Human and understand him as an intermediary of divine grace and a source of spiritual guidance for human beings. Nevertheless, these points of convergence, when situated within their respective philosophical frameworks, lead to markedly different conclusions in the social and political domains.

Both thinkers are broadly aligned in their understanding of the Perfect Human, particularly in emphasizing the Imam's sacred and non-material dimensions. This shared mystical language implies, at the political and social level, that the legitimacy of Shi'i political authority must ultimately derive from the Imam's inward *wilāyah*, thereby placing a fundamental limitation upon the absolute authority of earthly political institutions. In this sense, their theoretical convergence within Islamic philosophy and mysticism has contributed to preserving the foundations of Shi'i historical resistance and collective hope (*intizār*) throughout the period of occultation. The concept suggests that even during the Imam's occultation, political authority cannot be completely detached from divine legitimacy and the Imam's spiritual guidance.

Despite these similarities, however, the fundamental differences between Corbin's and Allameh Tabataba'i's approaches to the ontology and methodology of the Perfect Human lead to divergent political conclusions.

The significance of this distinction for political thought lies in the fact that Corbin's transhistorical approach fundamentally questions the legitimacy of any Shi'i political structure that claims to represent the Imam. By emphasizing the Imam's inward and transhistorical dimension, Corbin effectively deprives political structures that seek to act as representatives of the Imam of an independent sacred legitimacy. Within this perspective, the Imam, as a

transhistorical reality, is not dependent upon political or social institutions, and political life should instead derive its orientation from inward spirituality and mystical experience. Consequently, Corbin's position tends toward a critique of historical political power and Shi'i governments, including political formations associated with the Safavid period and certain contemporary ideological interpretations of Shi'ism.

By contrast, Allameh Tabataba'i's historical-legislative approach provides a theoretical and philosophical foundation for the development of conceptions of legislative *wilāyah* and legitimate government during the occultation. By articulating the human status of the Imam alongside his spiritual and mystical stations, Allameh addresses not only the Imam's role in the inward and spiritual guidance of human beings but also his necessity within the political and social order. From Allameh's perspective, even during the occultation, the Imam's ontological *wilāyah* provides a foundation for the exercise of legislative authority within the religious community, while jurists and religious institutions assume the role of representatives of the Imam's authority on earth. Thus, Allameh's historical-legislative approach strongly emphasizes the necessity of establishing Shi'i socio-political structures and, ultimately, Islamic government during the occultation.

This divergence in the conception of social obligation—particularly as reflected in the political and social implications of the two thinkers' positions—constitutes a fundamental challenge concerning the proper relationship between Shi'ism and political power. Through his rejection of historicism and his emphasis on the Imam's transhistorical character, Corbin effectively gives priority to inward spiritualism and tends toward the reconstruction of an inward, mystical utopian horizon. Allameh, by contrast, through his emphasis on social agency and the Imam's objective presence within history, articulates a social and political responsibility for Shi'is in the contemporary world and provides conceptual foundations for theories of active expectation and *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* during the occultation. This divergence in social obligation and political agency therefore represents the culmination of the comparative analysis.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that the fundamental difference between the approaches of these two thinkers gives rise to a profound divergence within Shi'i political thought. Corbin's interpretation tends toward the rejection of historical political power and a form of political withdrawal, whereas Allameh Tabataba'i's intellectual framework affirms the necessity and legitimacy of Shi'i socio-political organization and political agency even during the period of occultation. This divergence directly shapes different approaches to political power and political legitimacy in the contemporary world and within Shi'i societies.

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