



WHAT IS GHULUW



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What is Ghuluw (غُلُوْ)?

By: Seyyid Mohsen Rizvi

In the name of Allah, The most Beneficent, The most Merciful.

With the advent of social media the doors of information, perception, interpretation and analysis of religious text has become a common practice of the public. Where such issues were restricted to academic curriculum only, they are now discussed by everyone. Religion is discussed and argued by anyone who has access to social media and inventory of opinions, irrespective of his or her interest or aptitude in understanding the religion. The definite outcome of such religious discussions is deep ideological divisions among the believers, creating an impression that there are different sub-sects among the Shiites themselves.

The final nail in the coffin of judgment that a believer maneuvers to hammer is the label of “*Ghali*” (غَالِي) or “*Muqassir*” (مُقَصِّر) on another believer. What we are trying to share here is a basic understanding of these words and its application, and the consequences of using such labels for the believers. We sincerely hope that this humble effort will bring to light the importance of understanding the doctrinal limits from which a believer must refrain from crossing. It is the duty of our scholars to be a part of public discussions and take corrective actions and navigate the discussion to the right conclusion. The silence of the scholars or the learned few is making the average masses audacious enough to adventure into the darkness of wrong ideologies.

In the first section we will share the meaning and definition of the word “*Ghuluw*” as explained by our scholars, followed by relevant traditions of the infallibles (as). The word “*Ghuluw*” (غُلُوْ) means to exceed reasonable bounds, or to exaggerate, or to overstate. The one who does *Ghuluw* is known as “*Ghali*” (غَالِي), and those who do *Ghuluw* as an organized group or a sect is known as “*Ghulaat*” (غُلَاة) – *Plural*. These terms have become common these days as opposed to twenty years ago where we were totally oblivious to such terminologies. In Shia theology, the term “*Ghuluw*” (غُلُوْ) categorically means, to exceed the limits in ascribing ideas or divine attributes to certain personalities of Islam that can only be ascribed to Allah (swt).

Without any doubt, there are detailed explanations given about the definition of “*Ghuluw*” in various books that are available to seminary students but with my limited access we are relying on just one book. The name of the book is *Al-Qatra*¹ by *Ayatollah Sayyad Ahmed Al-Mustanbat* from Iran, in which the scholar explains ten characteristics of ideological exaggeration/*Ghuluw* which leads to polytheism. (First, we will list the characteristics in English and then copy the Arabic text in the bottom) –

While discussing about the merits and outstanding traits of Ahlul Bayt (as), *Ayatollah Al-Mustanbat* finds it necessary to draw the limits that are extremely important in perceiving the position of Ahlul Bayt (as) vis-à-vis Allah (swt).

The scholar lists the characteristics of the “*Ghulaat*”²

And as for as those who exceed (the limits), they are those who:

- 1) Think (of Ahlul Bayt) at the stage of Godhead (uluhiyyat).
- 2) Place them (Ahlul Bayt) as partners of Allah (swt) in their worship.
- 3) Consider Ahlul Bayt as independent of Allah (swt) in creation or bestowing sustenance (to the creation).
- 4) Consider that Allah (swt) incarnates (حُلُول) in them (Ahlul Bayt) or Allah (swt) is unified (*in self*) with them.
- 5) Consider (Ahlul Bayt) as the knower of the unseen without Allah (swt) giving them the knowledge (of unseen).
- 6) Consider them (Ahlul Bayt) as messengers (*Anbiya*).
- 7) Consider the spirit (of Ahlul Bayt) can transfer from one person to another.
- 8) Consider that seeking *Maarifat* (of Ahlul Bayt) is sufficient; there is no need to perform any actions of obedience, and there is no responsibility to abandoning sins (after seeking *Maarifat*).
- 9) Consider that (Ahlul Bayt) doesn't encounter death but something that resembles it.
- 10) Consider (Ahlul Bayt) above the rank of Prophet Muhammad (saw).

– Arabic –

وأما أصحاب الإفراط: فهم طوائف كأصحاب القوم بالوهيَّتهم ، أو بكونهم شركاء لله تعالى في العبودية ، أو في الخلق والرزق بإستقلالهم ، أو أن الله تعالى حلَّ فيهم واتَّحد بهم ، أو أنَّهم يعلمون الغيب بلا إعلام من الله ، أو أنَّهم أنبياء ، أو بتناسخ أرواح بعضهم إلى بعض ، أو أنَّ معرفتهم تغني عن فعل الطاعات ، ولا تكليف معها بترك المعاصي ، أو أنَّهم لم يقتلوا بل شبَّه لهم ، أو تفضيل أحد منهم على النبيِّ صلى الله عليه وآله وسلَّم

Considering the above characteristics of exaggeration/ “*Ghuluw*” within realm of theology there are few reasonable explanations as to why these characteristics are false.

Creator vs creation

Allah (swt) is the Creator as referred by Quran as the pronoun HE (*huwa*). Ayatollah Agha Mirza Pooya says in 'The Essence of Holy Quran', "**He** the Absolute is One in the true sense of Oneness from all aspects and in all respects in His essence and attributes. He is infinite, indefinable in any physical, meta-physical and mathematical term of finitude", and any "thing" that is finite is not self-existing and independent, as the noble scholar says, "The postulation of another like Him means finitude of both and the possibility of a human being encompassing two finite beings."

Any existent that is finite or composite in nature cannot be the Creator. The reality of oneness is evident with ample logical explanation available to the intellect, leaving no room to consider any existent as the Creator.

Allah (swt) grants knowledge

The holy Quran is a book of knowledge as Allah (swt) says:

وَلَا أَصْغَرَ مِنْ ذَلِكَ وَلَا أَكْبَرَ إِلَّا فِي كِتَابٍ مُبِينٍ

And not an atom's weight in the earth or in the sky escapeth your Lord, nor what is less than that or greater than that, but it is (written) in a clear Book. (10:61)

Knowledge whether known or unseen is in the book of Allah (swt), and the divine emissaries are the inheritors of this knowledge to the level of their ranks. As Qur'an says:

ثُمَّ أَوْفَيْنَا الْكِتَابَ الَّذِينَ اصْطَفَيْنَا مِنْ عِبَادِنَا

We gave the Book as an inheritance to Our chosen servants. (35:32)

It is narrated in al-Kafi that Imam Sadiq (as) said: "We have inherited this Quran which contains such things that can make the mountains move, cross the lands and make the dead to come to life. We know there is water in space."

So, the fourteen infallibles inherit the knowledge of unseen from Allah (swt), their knowledge is not independent of Allah (swt). At the same time, one must not assume that the knowledge of the infallibles (as) is "acquired" through experience and learning as it is the case for everyone else. The infallibles (as) don't acquire knowledge, rather they inherit knowledge from their Lord.

The Imam (a.s.) said, "We are the treasurers of the knowledge of Allah. We are the translators of the revelations of Allah. We possess complete Divine authority over all that is under the heavens and those

above the earth."

عن أبي جعفر (عليه السلام) قال: قلت له

قال: نحن خزان علم الله، ونحن تراجمة وحي الله، ونحن الحجة البالغة على من دون السماء ومن فوق الأرض

Knowledge and Action

The words of *Maarifat* are not meant to be only remembered as Imam Ali (as) said “*Whenever a tradition of the Holy Prophet is related to you, scrutinize it, do not be satisfied with mere verbatim repetition of the same because there are many people who repeat the words containing knowledge but only few ponder over them and try to fully grasp the meaning they convey.*”

Those who memorize verses of Qur'an or memorize the traditions of the infallibles (as) but doesn't act upon it, they are the ones who overstep the divine ordinance that is described in this saying of Imam Ali (as) “That knowledge which remains only on your tongue is very superficial. **The intrinsic value of knowledge is that you act upon it.**”³

Indeed knowledge/*Maarifat* of Allah (swt) is essence of worship and worship without *Maarifat* is misguidance, however *Maarifat* of Allah (swt) is not separate from action. The definition of *Maarifat* of Allah (swt) as the sixth Imam (as) declared when someone asked: What is *Maarifat* of Allah (swt)?

فما معرفة الله؟ قال

تصديق الله عزوجل وتصديق رسوله (صلى الله عليه وآله) وموالاته علي (عليه السلام) والائتمام به وبأئمة الهدى (عليهم السلام) والبراءة إلى الله عزوجل من عدوهم

Knowledge about Allah means to acknowledge (attest) the existence of Allah, the Most Holy, the Most High, to acknowledge His messenger and to love Imam Ali (a.s.). Of such knowledge is to follow him (Imam Ali) and the Imams of guidance and to denounce before Allah, the Most Holy, the Most High, their (Imams') enemies. ”⁴

Death and Martyrdom

Martyrdom/*Shahadat* is a divine blessing offered by Allah (swt) only to his chosen servants. The meaning of *Shahadat* in Islam means to bear witness to the truth, to implement the truth, to convey the truth, to protect the truth and oppose the falsehood till the soul is separated from the body – naturally or

by atrocities imposed. The noble scholar of south Asia, Allamah Rasheed Turabi said that the last words of Imam Ali (as) before closing his eyes were the following verses of Qur'an:

الَّذِينَ يُبَلِّغُونَ رِسَالَاتِ اللَّهِ وَيَخْشَوْنَهُ وَلَا يَخْشَوْنَ أَحَدًا إِلَّا اللَّهَ وَكَفَىٰ بِاللَّهِ حَسِيبًا

“Those who deliver the messages of Allah and fear Him, and do not fear anyone but Allah; and Allah is sufficient to take account. (33:39)

By reciting the above verse Imam Ali (as) made it clear that the divine emissary appears in the world as a human being as a paradigm of perfection inspiring other humans with words and practical actions. The characteristic of a divine leader is that he stands with the creation forbearing every possible challenge a human being can face – throughout the cycle of life and death so that he can be an example to all.

Rank of the Seal of Messengers (saw)

The highest rank among all the creation of Allah (swt) belongs to the Prophet (saw). Among 124,000 messengers, Allah (swt) has chosen 313 Prophets, and then chose 5 Prophet as the Arch-Prophets/*Ulil-‘azam* and then Allah (swt) has chosen Prophet Muhammad as the seal of the messengers/*Khatam un-Nabiyyin*. No creation in the realm of existence has higher rank than the messenger of Allah (swt). It is narrated in Al-Kafi that someone asked Imam Ali (as): “Are you a messenger?” Imam Ali (as) replied “Woe on you, I am one among many slaves of Muhammad (saw)”.⁵

فَقَالَ يَا أَمِيرَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ أَفَنَبِيٌّ أَنْتَ فَقَالَ وَبَلَّكَ إِنَّمَا أَنَا عَبْدٌ مِنْ عِبِيدِ مُحَمَّدٍ ص

However, it is important to know that the positions of the infallible Imams (as) is not lesser than the rank of the Prophet (saw) when it comes to the authority/*Wilayah*, as it is mentioned in various books of traditions that Prophet (saw) said (referring to the twelve Imams (as)): *The first among us is Muhammad, and the last among us is Muhammad, and the middle among us is Muhammad and all among us are Muhammad.*⁶

أَوَّلُنَا مُحَمَّدٌ وَآخِرُنَا مُحَمَّدٌ وَأَوْسَطُنَا مُحَمَّدٌ وَكُلُّنَا مُحَمَّدٌ

Divine Unity

In conclusion, if we understand the concept of *Tawheed* in Islam then the ideological controversies among the Shiites will fade away and the practices of labeling each other will hopefully come to an end. The apparent meaning of *Tawheed* is Oneness or the absolute unity of Allah (swt), however the essence

of the idea of *Tawheed* is to know Allah (swt) and worship Allah (swt) through the means of all the manifested Divine attributes in the form of guides that we are introduced to – the Ahlul Bayt (as).

There is a narration that captures this concept specifically. A companion of the sixth Imam said: "I heard Imam abu Ja'far (a.s.) saying, 'Through us Allah is worshipped. Through us Allah is known. Through us belief in the Oneness of Allah, the Most Holy, the Most High, is established. **Muhammad is the Hijab (curtain) of Allah, the Most Holy, the Most High.**" [7](#)

قَالَ: سَمِعْتُ أَبَا جَعْفَرٍ عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ يَقُولُ

بِنَا عَبْدَ اللَّهِ، وَبِنَا عُرِفَ اللَّهُ، وَبِنَا وَحِدَ اللَّهُ تَبَارَكَ وَتَعَالَى، وَمُحَمَّدٌ حِجَابُ اللَّهِ تَبَارَكَ وَتَعَالَى

The foundation of the concept of *Tawheed* is the concept of Wilayat – the divine authority of Prophet Muhammad (saw) which is granted by Allah (swt) to chosen servants by their ranks. Evidence of the highest rank of authority is provided in this verse of the holy Qur'an:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يُبَايِعُونَكَ إِنَّمَا يُبَايِعُونَ اللَّهَ يَدُ اللَّهِ فَوْقَ أَيْدِيهِمْ

"Lo! Those who swear allegiance unto thee (Muhammad), swear allegiance only unto Allah. The Hand of Allah is above their hands". (48:10)

We must firmly believe that Allah (swt) is the ultimate goal of our worship and at the same time understand the fact that Ahlul Bayt (as) are the means through which the ultimate goal is achieved, and it is never redundant to repeat that the practical application of *Tawheed* is as described in Quran:

وَلِلَّهِ الْأَسْمَاءُ الْحُسْنَىٰ فَادْعُوهُ بِهَا ۖ وَذَرُوا الَّذِينَ يُلْحِدُونَ فِي أَسْمَائِهِ ۚ سَيُجْزَوْنَ مَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ

"God has the most blessed Names. You should address Him in your worship by these Names (attributes). . ." (7: 180)

قال: نحن والله الاسماء الحسنی التي لا يقبل الله من العباد عملاً إلا بمعرفتنا

The Imam said, "We, I swear by Allah, are the most blessed names of Allah without which Allah does not accept any of the good deeds of His servants until they know us properly." [8](#)

To summarize, there are two divine systems that Allah (swt) has instituted, one is the system of guidance known as *Nubuwwah* or *Imamah*, and the other is the system of Authority known as *Wilayah*.

The fourteen infallibles are divine guides who are sent as human beings to guide the creation, it is against the divine justice to make human experience ineffective for the Imam (including death), because guidance will be ineffective if the Imam cannot experience the same challenges as the human being.

The fourteen infallibles are also the bearers of the absolute divine regency (Wilayah) of Allah (swt), they are the executioners of the Will of Allah (swt) on earth. To be the divine executioner on earth it is necessary to be constant with Will of Allah (swt) at all times, and to possess the authority to execute the Divine Will.

Take the example of Prophet Musa (as) who gathered his nation near mount Sanai and delivered the message of guidance, this was the role of a *Nabi*. However when the army of Pharaoh cornered the nation of Musa (as) at the shores of the black sea, with the authority and might Musa (as) struck his staff on the water that carved the path for his nation to escape, this was the role of a *Wali*.

As believers we need to acquire knowledge (ma'refat) so that we neither remain doubtful of the position of Ahlul Bayt (as) vis-à-vis the absolute creation, nor should we exceed in the matters of the position of Ahlul Bayt (as) vis-à-vis Allah (swt), as Imam Ali (as) said:

وقال (عليه السلام): هَلَكَ فِيَّ رَجُلَانِ: مُحِبٌّ غَالٍ وَمُبْغِضٌ

Two kinds of people will be damned on my account: Those who form exaggerated opinion about me and those who under-estimate me because they hate me. [9](#)

In closing, we pray and recite the highly recommended supplication of Dua Zaman al-Ghayba,

اللهم عرّفني نفسك ، فإنّك إنّ لم تعرّفني نفسك لم أعرف رسولك ، اللهم عرّفني رسولك ، فإنّك إنّ لم تعرّفني رسولك لم أعرف حجّتك ، اللهم عرّفني حجّتك ، فإنّك إنّ لم تعرّفني حجّتك ضللت عن ديني

"Oh Allah make me recognize You, because if You do not make me recognize You, I will not recognize Your Messenger. Oh Allah, make me recognize Your Messenger, because if You do not make me recognize Your Messenger, I will not recognize Your Proof on earth. Oh Allah, make me recognize Your Proof (Imam) because if You do not make me recognize Your Proof, I will stray off the path to my religion."

[1.](#) Al-Qatra min Bahar Manaqib al-Nabi wa Itrat (القطرة من بحار مناقب النبي والعترة) / Al-Sayyad Ahmed Al-Mustanbat (السيد احمد المستنيط)

[2.](#) Al-Qatra Vol-1 Page: 42

[3.](#) Nahjul Balagha, saying#95

[4.](#) al-Kafi(Islamiyyah edition)

[5.](#) al-Kafi(Islamiyyah edition) Vol-1 Page 90

[6.](#) Bihar al-Anwar(Tibb(a) Bayrout) Vol-26 Page6

[7.](#) al-Shafi fi Sharh al-Kafi vol-2 Page 405 / al-Hadaya li'Shi`ah A'immah al-Huda vol-2 Page 372

[8.](#) al-Kafi, vol. 1, pg. 143, Hadith # 4

[9.](#) Nahj al-Balagha, saying # 112 (in Arabic)

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