

Observations on the Meaning of Bay'at

Hajj Dr. Nor'Ali Tabandeh (Majzoub 'Alishah)¹

Bay'at literally means buying and selling, and comes from the word *bay'*, although it pertains to a specific type of buying and selling. In the Qur'an, the following verse is specifically about *bay'at*, in which God says:

(Verily, Allah has purchased from the faithful their selves and their properties, and in return for them is the Garden) (9:111).

This is itself a transaction. In other verses of the Qur'an this transaction and commitment is referred to as trade (*Tejaraht*). For example in verses 10 and 11 of *Surah al-Saff* it says: *(O you who believe! Shall I guide you to a trade that will save you from a painful chastisement?/ Believe in Allah and His Apostle, and strive in the way of Allah).*² Also in *Surah Fatir* verse 29 God says: *(Verily those who recite the Book of Allah and establish prayer and spend out of what We have provided them with, secretly and openly, hope for a trade that will never perish).*³

Types of Bay'at

This method of analogy has many instances in the Qur'an, but it should also be observed that when an analogy is made, or something is used as a metaphor for something else, these two things (vehicle and target) must not be similar in every respect, but the general aspect is what is intended. For example, in the Qur'an, *Taqhva* (piety) is likened to clothing, and it says: *(and the clothing of piety, that is the best) (7:26)*. Likewise, the wife has been mentioned as clothing for her husband, and the husband as clothing for his wife; and it says: *(they are clothing for you and you are clothing for them) (2:187)*.

¹ The author is the present *Qutb* (master) of the Ni'matullahi Sultan 'Alishahi Order of Sufism. The original article first appeared in the Persian journal published in Paris, *Irfan-e Iran*, No. 1, pps. 7-14. [Tr.]

² (61:10-11)

³ (35:29)

In another place, (*What? Does one of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? But you abhor it.*) (49:12). Therefore, this style is common in the Qur'an, and one cannot say that since it makes no sense to consider *bay'at* as trade or a transaction, it should be interpreted or defined as swearing allegiance (as will be discussed later).

In the beginning of Islam, since the Prophet had not yet established a government in Mecca, and it was only the spiritual doctrines of Islam that had been revealed, the Muslims there who visited the Prophet and converted to the faith submitted to the prophecy of Muhammad. Therefore, most of the verses of the Qur'an that were revealed in Mecca refer to them as Muslims and believers. But when the Messenger went to Medina, since he established a government there, many of the people, like the hypocrites, apparently submitted to the government, but in their hearts they were not Muslims. In reality, the *bay'at* obtained by the Prophet in Medina differed from the *bay'at* of Mecca. So, there were two kinds of *bay'at*.

A. Prophetic Bay'at

This was a *bay'at* by means of which one submitted to the rules of the government, even if he had no firm faith in Islam. For example, one might not have prayed or fasted, yet he could submit to the government. In contemporary language, this was really a request for citizenship. The acceptance of the *bay'at* by the Prophet was a sort of granting of citizenship in the government of Islam to the new Muslim who requested it. In reality, this was prophetic *bay'at*, and with its performance and acceptance of Islam one was allowed to marry another Muslim and to inherit [from a Muslim]. In the time of the Messenger, nobody's Islam was accepted without *bay'at*. After the liberation of Mecca, even Hind the Liver-eater⁴ made *bay'at*.

B. Bay'at Walawiyah⁵

The other *bay'at* was the *bay'at* of faith, which was considered different from the *bay'at* of Islam. In fact, this *bay'at* was made with the aspect of the *walayah* of the Prophet. Those who submitted to the prophecy of the Messenger in Mecca or afterward (and submission in Medina implied submission to the government of the Prophet), entered among the people of faith by this *bay'at walawiyah*. Of course, there was a group at that time who considered the prophecy of the Messenger to be a criterion, and they imagined that the *bay'at* of Islam was the same as acquiring faith. Hence, in the *Surah Hujrat* it says: (*The dwellers of the desert say: We believe. Say: You do not believe, but say: We submit; and faith has not yet entered into your*

⁴ Hind the Liver-eater was the wife of Abu Sufyan, the greatest opponent of the Prophet. She ate the liver of Hamzah, the uncle of the Prophet, when he was martyred in the Battle of Uhud, because he had killed her father at the Battle of Badr. [Tr.]

⁵ The term *walawiyah* is derived from *walayah*, meaning friendship with God and His guardianship. The literal meaning of *walayah* is 'nearness, closeness', and derivative meanings are 'authority, friendship'. It is through prophecy that Islam is revealed, and through *walayah* that faith is acquired. This is why *walayah* is said to be the interior dimension of prophecy, and is often translated as 'sainthood'. In Shi'ia theology, Muhammad (s) was both prophet and saint, and though he was the seal (or last) of the prophets, the Imams ('a) continued the line of his sainthood (*walayah*). [Tr.]

hearts).⁶ From this, the differentiation of Islam from faith becomes clear. Islam means submission to the government, which is obtained by the verbal declaration of the *two testimonies*,⁷ but faith pertains to the heart. Following this matter, the Prophet is addressed by God: (*They count it as a favor to you that they have submitted. Say: Do not count your submission as a favor to me, nay, rather God confers a favor on you, in that He guided you to faith, if it be that you are truthful*).⁸ From this verse it is clear that Islam precedes faith, that is, there can be no faith without Islam, while Islam without faith is possible. Of course, at the end of this verse it says, (*if it be that you are truthful*).

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7 The two testimonies of Islam are: "There is no god but God" and "Muhammad (s) is the prophet of God." [Tr.]

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That is, if you are truthful in becoming Muslims, not that you have become Muslims because of fear of the government. Considering these observations, one should note that in the time of the Prophet, the *bay'at* of faith was separate from the *bay'at* to the government, but after the passing away of the Prophet, the *bay'at* of faith was due to the *walayat* of 'Ali, and none of the other 'rightly guided caliphs'¹⁴ claimed to take such a *bay'at*. However, during the Ummayid and Abbasid periods, since for the most part they did not believe from the depths of their hearts, they did not differentiate these two important kinds of *bay'at* from one another, and hence, they imagined that *bay'at* was only for the sake of governing.^{15/15} Therefore, if they had

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14 Abu Bakr, Umar and Usman and 'Ali are referred to as 'rightly guided caliphs' (*Khulafa-ye Rashidin*). [Tr.]

15 In the olden times, and likewise at present, the term "*Bay'at*" is usually employed for governing, as was the case when the caliphs took *bay'at* and did not accept any kind of *bay'at* except their own. In this *bay'at*, those who gave *bay'at* swore to obey and observe the system of laws of the government. The government also guaranteed their lives and property and took responsibility for them. For

noticed that our Imams were taking *bay'at*, the lives of the Imams would have been in danger.

The Continuation of the bay'at of Faith in the Time of the Pure Imams ('a)

The Imams ('a) appointed some people to take *bay'at* for them. For example, Hazrat Sajjad ('a) gave license to his uncle, Muhammad Hanafiyyah, to take *bay'at* for him. This practice continued throughout the period of the Shi'ia Imams, and the Imams, who considered *bay'at* to be obligatory for the believers, usually took *bay'at* in secret through their representatives.

In this way we see how *bay'at* became legitimated in Islam. As appears from the verse of the *bay'at* of women, (*O Prophet! When believing women come to you making bay'at on the terms that they will not associate anything with God and will not steal, neither commit adultery, nor slay their children nor bring a calumny they forge between their hands and their feet, nor disobey you in anything honorable...*) (60:12), and from the previously mentioned verse, (*Verily, Allah has purchased from the faithful...*) (9:111), in these *bay'ats* one commits oneself to religious affairs and selling one's life and property. It is not merely, as some have imagined, for *jihad* and war, for *jihad* was prohibited for women even though the practice of *bay'at* for women continued.

In the history of Islam, even those who neglected the *bay'at* of faith took the *bay'at* of Islam or governmental *bay'at*, and no abrogation of *bay'at* has been narrated. Hence, the precept of *bay'at* must also be practiced now.

It has already been said that in the time of the Imams ('a), they themselves or their representatives took *bay'at*. In the time of the twelfth Imam, the duty of the four deputies (*nawwab arba'ah*)¹⁶ was only that they were intermediaries for the exoteric relations between the Shi'ia and the Imam. For example, since they had been told and knew the place of residence of the Imam, they took letters that the Shi'ia wrote and delivered them to him, obtained his replies and returned these to them. These four individuals themselves never claimed to take *bay'at*, nor has it been written in

example, in one of the wars, after the Muslims conquered parts of Syria, many people made *bay'at*, and became Muslims. These people gave *khums* and *zakat* [types of religious tithes in Islam]; some others remained with their own religions and did not abandon Christianity or Judaism and paid *jizyah* [a kind of tax for non-Muslims]. In any case, in return for giving *jizyah* or the religious tithes, the [Islamic] government protected their lives and property. However, when later the Roman army returned and reconquered those territories, the Muslims resisted, equipped an army and won back this land from the Romans. The [reestablished Islamic] government then returned the religious taxes collected as *khums*, *zakat* and the *jizyah* because it had failed to protect the lives and property of those who had paid them. This is the meaning of *bay'at* to government.

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¹⁷ Sheikh Junayd Baghdadi (d. 297/909) was initiated into Sufism by his uncle, Sari al-Saqaii, and he became known by the title, *Sheikh al-Ī'ifāh* (leader of the group of Sufis). Many Sufi orders, including the Ni'matullahi Order, trace their chain of initiation through him. [Tr.]

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The explanation of the matter is that after the time of Hazrat Reza (the eighth Shi'ia Imam) the strangulation of the Shi'ia intensified.^{20/20} Hazrat Reza himself gave permission for taking *bay'at* to his doorkeeper, Ma'ruf Karkhi. He also allowed him to appoint whoever he saw fit to succeed him (Ma'ruf) after informing and being granted the permission of the Imam.

Ma'ruf Karkhi appointed Sari Saqati who was thus given approval by the Imam. Sari Saqati also was given the same permission, and he appointed Junayd Baghdadi. The latter also had this license. After the occultation, the twelfth Imam gave Junayd permission to appoint his (Junayd's) successor. He exercised this permission. Hence, the *bay'at* of faith was not abrogated, and the successors of Junayd, in fact, are the indirect representatives of the Imam, who take *bay'at*. Of course, all the chains of permission are technically termed 'chains of the saints' or 'chains of Sufism' [Sufi orders], and there are various orders, which claim to be connected to the Imams. However, the soundness of these connections—in the view of us Shi'ia—must be investigated and researched, for orders that do not go back to the Imams have gaps in their chains of permission.

Since it is not clear that all the orders that claim to go back to the Imams are not without gaps in their chains of permission, one who has accepted these premises and the above mentioned theory is obliged to investigate and research the different orders, and those who consider themselves to be heads of the orders, to discover which chain of permission goes back to the Imams ('a) without interruption. Then he should acknowledge the order or orders that probably are connected to the Imams.

Of course, in the *bay'at* of faith, this contact of hands has taken place in a special fashion. Where God says (the hand of Allah is over their hands) (48:11), it is addressed to the Prophet, that (those who make *bay'at* with you really make *bay'at* with God) (48:11). However, since God is not corporeal or material—so that one could make *bay'at* with Him directly—He obtains *bay'at* through His Messenger, namely, the Prophet and his successors. In fact He wants to say that in the two hands that touch, the hand of God also is among them. This is what is intended by the expression (the hand of Allah is over their hands).

The Misunderstanding of Some Orientalists

Before Islam, the practice of *bay'at* of faith was customary in all the divine religions, although in every epoch it had a particular form. For example, when Jesus ('a) went to John ('a) to be baptized, John—who was aware of the future status of Jesus ('a)—said, 'I am the one who should be baptized by you, because this is the requirement of the present time. After being baptized, according to the instructions of John ('a), he started ascetic practices and became a prophet.

20 In order to understand the intensity of this strangulation, refer to the book *Mafatiĥ al-Janan* (Persian translation by Mehdi Ilaha Qomsheh'i, Tehran: Intisharat 'Ilmi, 1342, pps. 95-96), where the days of the week have been named after the names of the Imams. There is a detailed story narrated about a meeting between one of the Shi'ia and Hazrat 'Ali al-Naqi ('a).

According to what has been explained, those who do not believe in the *bay'at* of faith, consider *bay'at* to be only political, and since the latter is held to be presently precluded, they take it to be completely invalid.

Another point is that since the Orientalists and Islamicists cannot easily understand the word *bay'at*, which originally meant buying and selling, in the sense of a faith commitment in which one sells his soul and property to God to attain heaven, some of the translators of the Qur'an avoid taking *bay'at* in this sense. They have translated this term with other words, which usually mean taking an oath or promising to do something. For example, in the translations of the Qur'an into French by Regis Blachere and Edward Montet it has been translated into *serment d'allegiance* and *jurer allegiance*, meaning to pledge allegiance; however, pledging allegiance is the action of a single party while *bay'at* requires two parties. Accordingly, God says to the Prophet (s), (O Prophet! When believing women come to you to make *bay'at*...) (60:12), at the end of the verse He says, (make *bay'at* with them and ask forgiveness for them...). It appears from this verse that *bay'at* also has a party that accepts it, and it is not like a pledge that only requires a single agent.

Negligence of the true meaning of *bay'at* has given rise to the same sort of mistake, even on the part of those who are expert in Islamic issues, but who are not aware of their spiritual subtleties, such as Professor Hamidullah, who has translated the Qur'an into French. He translated the word *bay'at* as *jurer fidelite*, meaning a pledge of fidelity.

Apparently, the English translators of the Qur'an have fallen into the same trap. Arberry has used the expression 'to swear fealty', Pikhall 'to swear allegiance', and finally, in the translation of Yusuf Ali the expression 'plight one's fealty' is used. All these expressions more or less have the sense of promising loyalty.

Recently, I have seen that in some books the word 'initiation' is used for *bay'at*.²¹ Although this word is similar to 'ceremonies' and 'customs', such as purity of the body or clothes, etc., which may be observed along with *bay'at*, nevertheless 'initiation' differs from *bay'at*. In general, it may be said that the word *bay'at*, like the word *walayat*, has no synonym in European languages, and the word *bay'at* itself should be employed.

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