

Death of Ignorance and Its Connection to Knowing the Infallible Imam

Examining the *Hadith*: “Whoever Dies Without Having *Ma’rifa* about the Imam of Their Time Has Died a Death of Ignorance.”

One of the most well-known narrations in both Sunni and Shia sources is the hadith of Man Māt¹ or the Hadith of the Death of Ignorance, attributed to Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him and his family). According to a narration from Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (Peace be upon him), the Prophet (Peace be upon him and his family) stated:

“Whoever dies without having *ma’rifa* about their Imam has died a death of ignorance.”

This hadith establishes a direct link between knowing the Imam and what is termed as the death of ignorance. The term ignorance (*jāhiliyyah*) often evokes images of pre-Islamic Arabia, a time characterized by polytheism, tribal conflicts, and moral decline. However, this raises several critical questions:

-Is *jāhiliyyah* solely a reference to the pre-Islamic way of life among the Arabs, or does it have relevance in today's world?

-Who exactly is the Imam mentioned in this narration?

-What does it mean to have knowledge and *ma’rifa* about the Imam?

-What does it mean to die a death of ignorance?

¹. *Man māta wa lam ya`rif imāma zamānih, māta mītatīn jāhiliyyah.*

Since Islamic teachings and narrations are based on innate human truths and are addressed to people of all times and places, it follows that every era has its own divinely appointed infallible Imam. This means that it is our responsibility to identify and know the Imam of our time.

The next crucial question is: What does it truly mean to know the Imam? Is it sufficient to simply know their name, lineage, and physical attributes, or does *ma'rifa* go beyond this basic knowledge?

In any aspect of life, staying safe requires identifying potential dangers and taking precautions to avoid them. The same principle applies to the death of ignorance. To protect ourselves from it, we must first understand what leads to such a fate and distance ourselves from those causes. This, in turn, requires a deep comprehension of the concept of ignorance.

While many people perceive the Age of Ignorance as merely a historical period from over a thousand years ago, today we encounter terms like modern ignorance and holy ignorance, each referring to specific patterns of thought and behavior. But do these concepts apply only to certain societies and geographical locations? What are the characteristics of communities influenced by such forms of ignorance? In this article, we will explore the following key questions:

- What is *jāhiliyyah*, and what defines an ignorant way of life?
- Who is the Imam of our time?
- What does it mean to attain deep knowledge (*ma'rifa*) about the Imam of our time?
- How can one avoid the death of ignorance?

Understanding Ignorance and Its Different Forms

Some define the Age of Ignorance as a specific historical period before the advent of Islam, characterized by a lack of civilization and knowledge. During that time, harmful customs such as burying girls, tribal warfare over livestock, excessive alcohol consumption, gambling, and usury were widespread. But was ignorance truly limited to that era and those particular behaviors? Or do misguided customs and unethical practices persist in today's world, although in different forms?

Jahiliyya exists in today's world as well. We should open our eyes to identify jahiliyya. Today, the same phenomenon exists: incalculable, unbridled and unreasonable lust. Today, the logic of the western world for indulging in lust is based on one's interest and desire... The difference between this jahiliyya and the jahiliyya during the early Islamic Era - as the Holy Quran says, "the first jahiliyya" - is that in the present time, jahiliyya is equipped with the weapon of knowledge. Knowledge - which should be a means for people's happiness - has become an instrument for bringing darkness and disaster to human beings and human societies. Those people who are bullying the world in the present time are doing so by relying on their products of knowledge...Today, jahiliyya has been reproduced and it enjoys a great capability. It is hundreds - it should be said, thousands - of times more dangerous than jahiliyya during the early Islamic era. ²

². Leader's [Speech to Officials and Ambassadors of Islamic Countries](#)," The Official Website of Ayatollah Khamenei, accessed January 30, 2025.

The reality is that ignorance is not confined to a particular time period; it has existed in the past and continues to exist today. What has changed is its outward appearance. Conceptually, ignorance can be categorized into two main types:

- Modern Ignorance
- Holy Ignorance

Modern Ignorance

Modern ignorance operates under the dominance of human sciences, masked by the guise of knowledge and civilization. It is most evident in today's so-called advanced societies where science has rapidly progressed, leading to remarkable technological innovations, yet where cruelty and brutality far exceed those of the pre-Islamic Age of Ignorance.

In this modern era, oppression against nature, animals, the environment, and even human beings is more pervasive than ever before. In many parts of the world, especially those that claim to be the most advanced, this very ignorance continues to dominate.

Holy Ignorance

Holy ignorance occurs when people outwardly adhere to religion yet fail to seek true guidance beyond the Quran, believing that the Quran alone is sufficient for their spiritual and societal direction. However, it is essential to know that the Quran serves as the fundamental constitution of Islam. Just as a functioning society requires not only a constitution but also executive, legislative, and judicial

authorities to implement and interpret its laws, the same principle applies to religious guidance.

The Quran provides general principles, but the details of religious laws and their practical application must be clarified through other means. In the Quran, God emphasizes the necessity of explaining its verses ³, a responsibility entrusted to an infallible expert, Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him and his family). Without such an infallible expert to interpret divine guidance, societies inevitably drift into darkness and ignorance. Thus, sacred ignorance is found in communities where, on the surface, the religion of the Prophet (Peace be upon him and his family) appears to be upheld, and people claim to believe in him and the Quran. Yet, beneath this sacred facade, a profound tragedy unfolds, one that the Infallible Imams (Peace be upon them) refer to in their supplications as the greatest calamity (*al-muṣībat al-‘aẓmā*). This calamity is the removal of the infallible expert from society. The Quran warns against this danger and the inevitable return to ignorance that follows: "Muhammad is not but a messenger; [other] messengers have passed on before him. So if he were to die or be killed, would you regress into ignorance" ⁴?

Exploring the Example of the Imam and the Concept of *Ma'rifa* in the Hadith of the Death of Ignorance

The wisdom and Lordship (*rububiyah*) of God necessitate that no nation be left without a guide or role model ⁵. These guides exist to provide clear proof so that

³. Quran 16:44: "And We have sent down to you [O Prophet] the Reminder, so that you may explain to people what has been revealed for them."

⁴. Quran, 3:144

⁵. Quran, 13:7: "You are only a warner, and every people had a guide."

people cannot claim ignorance before God ⁶ . Accordingly, after Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him and his family), there must be leaders who continue to guide people. The Prophet (Peace be upon him and his family), in explaining the phrase "Ulu l-Amr" in the verse "O you who have believed, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you..." ⁷ , referred to his household ⁸ (Peace be upon them), thus clarifying the responsibility of the infallible experts after him.

One of the questions regarding the *Hadith* of the Death of Ignorance is: Who is meant by the Imam in this narration? Based on our explanation of ignorance, the Imam is the infallible expert who is essential for understanding the true essence of religion and finding the path to fulfill the purpose of our creation.

In every era, there is an infallible Imam whom the people of that time must know and have *ma'rifa* about. The Imam of our time, who is currently in occultation, is Imam Mahdi (May Allah hasten his advent). To understand the concept of *ma'rifa* about the Imam of our time, we must first understand the general meaning of *ma'rifa* and then define what it means specifically in relation to him.

The Concept of Ma'rifa and Knowing the Imam in the Hadith of Death in Ignorance

The first part of the *Hadith* of the Death of Ignorance refers to having *ma'rifa* about the Imam. In the text of the narration, the phrase "*lam ya`rif*" is used, not "*lam ya`lam*." The first phrase refers to *ma'rifa*, while the second refers to *ilm*

⁶. Quran, 4:165: "[All were] messengers delivering good news and warnings so humanity should have no excuse before Allah after [the coming of] the messengers."

⁷. Quran, 4:59

⁸. Khazzāz al-Rāzī, *Kifāyat al-athar*, pp. 54-55; Şadūq, *Kamāl al-dīn*, vol. 1, pp. 253-254.

(knowledge). *Ilm* is a general collection of information, a mental capacity that leads only to awareness. However, *ma'rifa* is a deeper form of knowledge; it involves specific intuition and insights, creating practical ability and being regarded as a true asset.

We encounter many examples of both *ilm* and *ma'rifa* in our lives. For instance, knowing the driving rules, the grammatical rules of a language, or the general principles of swimming is *ilm* and mere knowledge. But actually driving a car, speaking a language fluently, or swimming are forms of *ma'rifa* or true knowledge and mastery of a skill.

The reason the narration specifically refers to *ma'rifa* about the Imam rather than *ilm* is that true knowledge of the Imam compels us to take action. Simply knowing the Imam's name, lineage, and background is considered basic knowledge. In fact, in many cases, the enemies of the Imam may possess more of this basic information than his own followers.

An example of this is the story of Imam Hussain (Peace be upon him) in Karbala. The opposing army was fully aware of the Imam's family lineage, name, and background. However, due to their lack of true *ma'rifa*, they failed to recognize that Imam Hussain (Peace be upon him) was the absolute truth and should not be opposed. Thus, knowing the Imam's name and familial details does not constitute *ma'rifa*. Knowledge is the prerequisite for acknowledging the authority of the infallible Imam and for living in devotion to his guidance, service, and leadership. The lifestyle of one who is connected to the infallible expert must be distinct from that of others.

Based on the definition of *ma'rifa*, the key issue in having *ma'rifa* about Imam Mahdi (May Allah hasten his advent) as the infallible expert of our time lies in establishing an existential connection with him. The sign of truly having *ma'rifa* about the Imam is that our lifestyle should be such that we actively contribute to removing the obstacles to his advent. If we do not reconnect with our primary family, meaning Imam Mahdi (May Allah hasten his advent), and strive to remove the barriers to his return, we will inevitably become like those who, due to their lack of *ma'rifa*, are condemned to a death of ignorance.

The Connection Between Knowing the Imam and the Death of Ignorance

One of the greatest injustices throughout history has been the removal of the infallible expert from society. But why do we consider this an injustice? Imagine a society where a group of people have become doctors, but the conditions are such that neither the doctors are allowed to practice nor are patients permitted to seek medical help. Such a scenario would undeniably be a catastrophe and an injustice. Similarly, the infallible expert is like a doctor for the community, and their presence is even more crucial. A society deprived of this blessing is like a patient without access to the cure for its ailments.

The absence of *ma'rifa* about the infallible expert has similar negative consequences. According to the words of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him and his family), it leads to the death of ignorance. To understand this concept more clearly, let us make a comparison between a fetus in the womb of his mother and a human being in the womb of this world.

In previous lessons, we mentioned that the world, with its powerful and intelligent design, manages the development of a fetus within the mother's womb. If the connection between the womb and the world is severed even for a moment, the fetus would perish. Similarly, the connection with the infallible expert is crucial for human beings in the "womb" of this world. If that connection is not maintained, we either perish or move to the next phase in an incomplete state. In fact, the death of ignorance refers to a meaningless birth into the next stage of existence. We were not brought into this world to reach perfection in inanimate, vegetative, animalistic, or intellectual qualities alone. God breathed His spirit into us so that we could ultimately become similar to Him and become His manifestation, attaining the status of *Khalifatullah* (God's representative on earth). To achieve this status, we must remain connected to the role models who are the perfect manifestations of God, namely, the infallible experts.

The greatest affliction humanity is currently suffering from is the absence of the infallible expert. If this affliction is not cured, we all, without ever fulfilling our true potential, which is reaching the status of being human, will be "aborted" from the womb of this world. Our purpose in this world is not merely to accumulate wealth or attain higher levels of inanimate, vegetative, animalistic, or intellectual perfections. We must follow the wise management of the infallible expert, navigating the path of guidance toward a healthy birth. A healthy birth means acquiring the necessary tools for life in the realms that come after this world.

The absence of the infallible expert leads to deficiencies in all the dimensions of our existence. Conversely, the presence of the infallible expert enables every part of our being to benefit from special blessings. The human dimension, however, is the most

fundamental dimension of our being, and the advent of Imam Mahdi (may Allah hasten his advent) is of greatest benefit to this aspect. Through his presence, we can grow to the greatness he embodies and attain the status of God's deputy on earth.

In this article, centered around the Hadith of the Death of Ignorance, we explored the concept of ignorance and described two types: modern ignorance and holy ignorance. We also discussed that, according to divine wisdom, there has always been an infallible Imam in every era to guide people. In our time, this Imam is Imam Mahdi (May Allah hasten his advent).

One crucial matter that we all need to understand is gaining *ma'rifa* about the Imam. True *ma'rifa* of the Imam goes beyond mere knowledge of his name or lineage; it must manifest in our lifestyle. One who, in every decision, relationship, behavior, and thought, is mindful of the presence of Imam Mahdi (May Allah hasten his advent) and works toward removing the obstacles to his advent can claim to truly have *ma'rifa* about the Imam.

The reason why failing to know the Imam leads to the death of ignorance is that the Imam is like the womb that enables us to have a healthy birth into the hereafter. A fetus outside of the womb has no future other than death and miscarriage. The more we know the Imam and strengthen our connection with him, the further we distance ourselves from the danger of the death of ignorance.