

# Nizari Ismaili Theology and the Doctrine of Salvation

## Introduction

Nizari Ismaili Islam is a major branch of Shi'a Islam, tracing its lineage through Imam Isma'il ibn Ja'far and his descendants. Today, the Nizari Ismailis are led by a living hereditary Imam (spiritual leader), presently known as Aga Khan IV, who is regarded as the direct successor of Prophet Muhammad through Imam Ali and Fatima <sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup>. Nizari theology is rooted in Shi'i principles but distinguished by a strong emphasis on the *Imamat* – the institution of the Imam – and on esoteric interpretation (*ta'wil*) of scripture. The community's belief system centers on the absolute unity and transcendence of God (*tawhīd*), the finality of Prophet Muhammad's message, and the continuation of divine guidance through the line of Imams. In Nizari understanding, salvation is not merely a matter of adhering to outward religious law, but is deeply linked to spiritual enlightenment and closeness to God, achieved through the guidance of the Imam and the practice of the faith's ethical and devotional principles <sup>3</sup> <sup>4</sup>. This article explores the core tenets of Nizari Ismaili Islam, the pivotal role of the Imamat in the doctrine of salvation, the community's spiritual practices, and a comparative view of these beliefs with those of Sunni Islam.

## Core Tenets of Nizari Ismaili Islam

**Absolute Monotheism (Tawhīd):** Nizari Ismaili theology affirms a rigorous concept of God's oneness and transcendence. Following the teachings of early Shi'i Imams and Ismaili philosophers like Nasir Khusraw, Nizaris emphasize that God is beyond all human descriptions and attributes <sup>5</sup> <sup>6</sup>. This apophatic theology holds that any positive attribute ascribed to God is ultimately inadequate; God's essence is indescribable and above comprehension. The Ismaili declaration of faith thus focuses on God's absolute unity, with believers contemplating the Divine through its manifestations (such as the Divine "Light" or *nūr*) rather than attempting to delimit God's nature. Nasir Khusraw (11th century), for example, taught that understanding *tawhīd* properly – as the oneness and ineffability of God – is the only path to spiritual perfection <sup>5</sup>.

**Prophethood (Nubuwwah) and Revelation:** Like all Muslims, Nizari Ismailis regard Prophet Muhammad as the final messenger of God and the Quran as God's final revelation. They share with other Shi'a the belief that the Prophet also entrusted his spiritual authority to his family (Ahl al-Bayt). In Nizari doctrine, revelation has both an outer, literal meaning (*ẓāhir*) and an inner, hidden meaning (*bāṭin*). The Prophet's role was to deliver the *ẓāhir* (the external message), and it is understood that he designated someone to continue unfolding the *bāṭin*. This continuation is where the doctrine of Imamate becomes central: Imam 'Ali is believed to have been appointed to carry on the Prophet's teaching and interpretation (*ta'wil* and *ta'līm*, meaning esoteric interpretation and authoritative teaching) of the Quran <sup>1</sup>. The Nizari Ismaili constitution explicitly affirms that according to Shi'i doctrine and tradition, the Prophet Muhammad appointed Ali as the first Imam to guide the community and interpret the faith, and that the Imamat was to continue by heredity through Ali and Fatima's lineage <sup>1</sup>. Thus, the chain of Imams is seen as the vehicle through which the inner truth of revelation is continuously disclosed to humanity.

**Imamate (Divinely-Guided Leadership):** The Imamate is the cornerstone of Nizari Ismaili theology. Nizaris maintain that at all times in history there is a single rightful Imam – a living successor of Ali – who is the spiritual authority and guide for the community. The Imam in Nizari belief is not a prophet but is believed to be divinely inspired and entrusted with the Prophet’s *walāyah* (spiritual authority and guardianship). He is often described as the *ḥujjah* (Proof) of God on earth and the bearer of the Divine Light (*nūr*)<sup>3</sup>. Classical Ismaili teachings describe the Imam as having a perfect understanding of both the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of religion<sup>7 8</sup>. Recognition of and obedience to the Imam of the Time (*Imām-i Zamān*) is considered an absolute duty of every believer<sup>9</sup>. This doctrine was developed early in Shī’i history: by the time of Imams Muhammad al-Bāqir and Ja’far al-Ṣādiq (7th–8th centuries), Shī’i theology had crystallized around the need for continuous divine guidance through the Imams<sup>10 11</sup>. The Ismaili view extends this principle, asserting that divine guidance did not cease with the Prophet but continues through the hereditary Imams. Each Imam provides authoritative interpretation of scripture and ensures the faith remains relevant to the needs of the time<sup>12</sup>. In modern times, the 49th Imam, Aga Khan IV (Shah Karim al-Husayni), has continued to stress the importance of the Imamatus by guiding his followers in both spiritual and worldly matters<sup>13</sup>. He emphasizes that Islam’s vision encompasses both the salvation of the soul and the creation of a just society, and thus his guidance addresses personal faith as well as ethical and social concerns<sup>4</sup>.

**Esoteric Interpretation (Ta’wīl) and Knowledge:** A distinctive feature of Nizari theology is the emphasis on esoteric knowledge (*‘ilm* or *ma’rifah*) as the key to salvation. Ismailis hold that sacred scripture (the Quran, and by extension all revealed truth) has layers of inner meaning that are accessible through *ta’wīl*, the allegorical or symbolic interpretation. Throughout Ismaili history – especially during the Fatimid period (10th–12th centuries) – Ismaili scholars developed elaborate cosmological and philosophical systems to articulate these inner truths<sup>14 15</sup>. Early Ismaili cosmology, for example, described creation in emanative terms influenced by Neoplatonism, all intended not just as speculative philosophy but with a *soteriological purpose*: “to show that man’s salvation depended on his acquisition of a specific type of knowledge (gnosis) imparted by God’s messengers (*nāṭiqs*) and their legitimate successors in every era”<sup>16</sup>. In other words, gaining the inner knowledge revealed by the prophets and Imams is seen as the path to deliverance. This belief in the transformative, saving power of spiritual knowledge underlies many Nizari traditions, from the sermons of medieval missionaries (*dā’īs*) to the poetry of Ismaili Pirs (missionaries) in South Asia. It also reinforces the centrality of the Imam, who as the “Guardian of the esoteric” provides authoritative teaching (*ta’līm*) that leads the seeker from the *ẓāhir* toward the *bāṭin* (from the outward forms to the inner reality)<sup>3</sup>.

**Ethical Practice (Dīn and Dunyā):** Alongside these theological principles, Nizari Ismailism teaches a balanced integration of faith with daily life. The term *dīn* (religion) and *dunyā* (world) are often used to denote this balance. The present Imam has frequently highlighted that Islam calls for maintaining equilibrium between spiritual well-being and material quality of life<sup>13</sup>. Thus, worldly responsibilities such as education, family life, and improving society are not seen as separate from the religious path but as part of it. The Qur’anic ethos, as interpreted by the Imams, is understood to require both personal piety and public ethics. Aga Khan IV has noted that the Qur’an “is concerned with the salvation of the soul, but commensurately also with the ethical imperatives which sustain an equitable social order”<sup>4</sup>. This holistic vision means that core tenets of Nizari faith include compassion, social justice, pluralism, and the pursuit of knowledge, all under the guidance of the Imam’s inspiration.

## The Role of the Imam and the Living Imam in Salvation

In Nizari Ismaili doctrine, the living Imam of the time is absolutely central to the salvation of individual believers and the community. The Imam is viewed not only as a community leader but as a spiritual intercessor and guide who connects the believer to God. This concept has deep roots in Ismaili thought and is often illustrated by devotional literature and doctrinal texts.

**Imam as Guide and “Bridge” to God:** Nizari Ismailis believe that God, in His mercy, provides continuous guidance through the Imams so that believers are never left without a divinely guided teacher <sup>17</sup> <sup>3</sup>. Nasir Khusraw articulated this by arguing that God would not send a revelation without appointing someone to interpret it for each era <sup>18</sup>. For the Ismailis, this guide is the Imam of the Time – a living, flesh-and-blood person who carries the **Light of God (Nūr)** and is endowed with divine inspiration (*ilm*). The Imam’s knowledge is believed to be *infallible* in spiritual matters, and he is sometimes described in Ismaili writings as the “Speaking Qur’an” (in contrast to the written Qur’an) because he can reveal its inner meanings. Nasir Khusraw explained that the Imam, as a living proof of God, is “*perfectly capable of providing guidance in spiritual and worldly affairs, serving as a living bridge between the material world and the divine realm*” <sup>18</sup>. Through obedience to the Imam’s guidance (*farmān*) and love (*muḥabbat*) for him, Ismaili Muslims seek to gain proximity to God.

**Mediator of Salvation:** In Shi’i theology broadly, the Prophet’s family (the Imams) are often seen as intercessors on the Day of Judgment. Nizari Ismailism takes this further by emphasizing that attaining salvation – in both this life and the hereafter – is contingent upon one’s relationship with the Imam. A core teaching is that **allegiance to the Imam is a fundamental requirement for salvation**, because it is only “*through their mediation (shafā’a) that believers can attain knowledge of God and salvation on the Last Day.*” <sup>3</sup> Early Ismaili sources describe the Imam as the *safinat al-najāt*, the “Ark of Salvation,” an image likening the Imam to Noah’s Ark in which believers must seek refuge to be saved. This notion was vividly expressed by medieval Nizari poets. For example, the 13th-century Ismaili poet **Nizari Quhistani** underscored the Imam’s salvific role in a famous verse: “*Salvation is to be found in the Imam of the Time. ... Ever since I found the Imamate, permanently in human form, I have known no other guide than the living, everlasting Imam, for in his command, I have found peace in both the worlds.*” <sup>19</sup> <sup>20</sup>. In this poetic testimony, Quhistani affirms that recognizing and obeying the Imam brings tranquility in this life and assurance of redemption in the hereafter (the “two worlds”). The Imam’s guidance is thus seen as the sure path to please God and secure one’s ultimate destiny.

**Imam as Theophanic Light:** Nizari theology sometimes uses the language of luminosity and theophany to describe the Imam. The Imam is said to possess the **Nūr of Imamāt**, a spiritual light passed down from Imam Ali through each successor. While Ismailis stress that the Imam is human (not divine himself), he is the repository of divine light and wisdom. In Ismaili metaphysics, this light is the same divine spark that illuminated the prophets and previous Imams. Because of this, devotional literature often attributes lofty qualities to the Imam. For instance, Pirs in South Asia wrote *gināns* (hymns) equating the Imam’s guidance with seeing a glimpse of the Divine. **Pir Sadr al-Dīn**, a 14th-century Ismaili missionary, wrote of the “*beatific vision*” of the Imam in two aspects: a physical encounter (*dīdar* or sight of the Imam in person) and a spiritual illumination of the Imam’s essence “*through which God is recognized.*” <sup>21</sup> In one of his mystic *gināns*, Pir Sadr al-Dīn describes losing consciousness of the self in meditation and beholding an indescribable light – ultimately exclaiming, “*with my own eyes, I have seen Him!*” <sup>22</sup>. Although couched in poetic symbolism, such verses convey the belief that the Imam can lead the soul to direct knowledge (*ma’rifa*) of God. The Imam is thus a means (*wasīla*) through whom the believer perceives and approaches

the Divine. The “door” (**bāb**) to God in Ismaili terminology is not closed; it remains open in the person of the Imam and, by extension, the Imam’s appointed representatives (historically, the Pīrs or dāʿīs). Without this door, Ismaili teachings warn, the path to God’s intimate knowledge would be inaccessible – human efforts would remain “futile and fruitless” <sup>23</sup> .

**Imam’s Contemporary Role:** The present Imam, Aga Khan IV, continues to embody this doctrine in the modern context. He is regarded as the *Hāẓir Imām* (“Present/living Imam”) and is believed to provide authoritative guidance suited to the challenges of today. His role in salvation is not seen in magical terms but through guiding individuals to live ethical, enlightened lives. Under his leadership, the Ismaili community emphasizes education, humanitarian service, and a search for balance between spiritual and material needs – all considered facets of the Imam’s guidance that help followers attain a wholesome life and earn God’s pleasure. The current Imam often advises his followers on matters of personal faith (e.g. prayer, generosity, integrity) and communal well-being (e.g. health, education, development), reflecting the belief that following the Imam’s *taʿlīm* (instruction) “lights the murids’ path to spiritual enlightenment and vision” <sup>24</sup> <sup>25</sup> . Ultimately, Nizari Ismailis trust that loyalty to the Imam and adherence to his guidance is their route to *falāḥ* (salvation or success). As one Ismaili motto, derived from a 19th-century Ismaili prayer, succinctly puts it: “*He who has recognized the Imam of his time has recognized God.*” This encapsulates how pivotal the Imam’s role is in the Nizari understanding of salvation.

## Ismaili Practices and the Spiritual Path to Salvation

Belief and practice in Nizari Ismailism are closely intertwined, with religious practices seen as the disciplines that cultivate the soul for eventual salvation. The community’s practices combine exoteric Muslim rituals with distinctive esoteric and communal traditions, all aimed at fostering a deeper relationship with the Imam and through him with God. Some key aspects of Nizari Ismaili practice include:

**Prayer and Devotional Life:** Nizari Ismailis perform a set of daily prayers known as *Duʿā*, which are typically offered three times a day in place of the standard five daily prayers (*ṣalāt*) observed by other Muslims. The *Duʿā* is recited in multiple languages (including Arabic) and contains Quranic verses as well as specific references to the Imams. Notably, it includes a phrase from the Qur’an 36:12 – “*And We have vested (the knowledge and authority) of everything in the manifest Imam*” <sup>26</sup> – underscoring the Ismaili conviction that the Imam of the time is the inheritor of the Prophet’s authority. Through the *Duʿā*, Ismailis reaffirm their *shahāda* (testimony of faith in Allah and Muhammad as His messenger) and also implicitly acknowledge the Imam’s role as guide. Devotees also gather in **Jamatkhanas** (Ismaili prayer halls) for congregational prayers and supplications. A unique spiritual practice in Nizari tradition is the collective or individual reflection known as *meditation* or *dhikr* (remembrance of God and the Imam). While specifics are not publicly detailed, it often involves silently invoking the Divine Name and concentrating on the Imam’s light. Such practices are intended to purify the heart and open the inner eye of the soul. In Ismaili devotional literature, achieving an inner vision of the Imam (*didār-e bāṭinī*) is akin to attaining paradise in this life. **Didār** (literally “vision”) also refers to the event of physically seeing the Imam, such as when the Aga Khan makes visits to his communities. This physical *didār* is a joyous, sacred occasion for Ismailis, believed to bestow spiritual blessings and energize their faith. Theologically, it resonates with the concept of the beatific vision – a foretaste of meeting the Divine – since the Imam’s presence is for Ismailis a mirror reflecting God’s light <sup>21</sup> .

**Ethical Conduct and Community Service:** Living an ethical life is considered essential to the Ismaili spiritual path. Ismaili teachings often quote the Qur’anic injunction “and vie with one another in good works” (Qur’an 5:48) as a call to action. Personal virtues like honesty, generosity, humility, and forgiveness

are constantly emphasized in the Imam's guidance. These virtues are seen as the fruits of true faith and keys to salvation, echoing the Islamic principle that faith (*īmān*) and good deeds (*ʿamal ṣāliḥ*) go hand in hand. Furthermore, service to others (*khidmat*) is highly valued. The Ismaili community, under the Imam's direction, has established numerous charitable and development institutions (grouped in the Aga Khan Development Network) as an expression of the Quranic ethic to improve quality of life and help the needy. Engaging in voluntary service – whether through time, knowledge, or resources – is considered a form of worship and a way to cleanse one's soul. By helping to alleviate poverty, educate the illiterate, or heal the sick, Ismailis believe they are putting their faith into action and journeying on a **spiritual path of service**. This aligns with Aga Khan IV's teaching that the faith is “*concerned with the salvation of the soul, but also with the ethical imperatives which sustain an equitable social order.*”<sup>4</sup> Serving God's creation is thereby a means to attain God's favor.

**Fasting, Pilgrimage, and Festivals:** Nizari Ismailis observe Ramadan fasting and the hajj pilgrimage in spirit, though with some flexibility as guided by the Imam. Historically, due to persecution or geographic dispersion, not all Ismailis could perform the hajj; instead, pilgrimage to the Imam's residence (or sending *ardī*, letters of prayer, to the Imam) became a symbolic surrogate. In contemporary times, many Nizaris do perform the hajj to Mecca, but the ultimate “pilgrimage” for an Ismaili remains the quest to behold the Imam (hence the fervent participation in *didār* gatherings). The fast of Ramadan is generally observed by Ismailis, but the Imam's guidance has at times allowed for exceptions (for example, students, the ill, or those doing very strenuous work might be advised to manage fasting with flexibility). Moreover, Ismaili literature has often interpreted fasting esoterically – the true fast being to refrain from all evil and selfishness. Major Islamic festivals like Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha are celebrated by Ismailis, as is Eid-e Ghadir (commemorating Prophet Muhammad's designation of Ali at Ghadir Khumm). Additionally, Nizaris celebrate the Imam's accession (*Imamat Day*) and birthday (*Salgirah*), which are occasions for renewing their spiritual allegiance and gratitude for the Imamat.

**Ginān and Qasida Traditions:** The spiritual path in Nizari Ismailism is greatly enriched by its artistic and literary heritage. In South Asian communities, the singing of **gināns** – devotional hymns composed by Ismaili Pirs – is a beloved practice. These poetic songs, composed in languages like Gujarati and Sindhi, contain mystical teachings and moral allegories drawn from both Islamic and local Indic imagery. They often speak of the soul's longing for the Imam (likened to the lover's longing for the Beloved) and describe the Imam as the captain of the ship in a stormy sea of life, or as the rain-bearing cloud quenching the thirst of souls<sup>27</sup>. One famous ginān by Pir Hasan Kabīr al-Dīn, “*Abdu'l Nabi*”, narrates in metaphorical terms the entire cosmology and the promise of salvation through recognizing the Imam. Another central hymn, “*Anant Akhādo*” by Pir Sadr al-Dīn, recounts the eternal cosmic cycle and the role of the Imam in redeeming souls at the end of time. The **Central Asian and Persian Ismaili communities**, on the other hand, have a rich repertoire of **Qasā'id** (odes) in Persian and Arabic that praise the Imams and impart philosophical teachings. Whether ginān or qasīda, these works serve as vehicles for spiritual education; memorizing and meditating on them is a practice aimed at nurturing the soul's readiness for eternal life. It is believed that devotion expressed in sincere music and poetry refines the soul, making it a receptive vessel for divine grace (*baraka*). Indeed, in some Ismaili traditions it was held that hearing certain sacred gināns at the time of death would help assure the soul's salvation and vision of the Imam's *nūr* in the hereafter<sup>28</sup>.

**Initiation and Personal Commitment:** While Ismailis are typically born into the faith, there is an element of personal *bay'ah* (pledge of allegiance) that each murīd (disciple) offers to the Imam. In the modern period, this is symbolized through the religious education system and moments like the enrollment of youth into the Ismaili Tariqah (path) via a ceremony (sometimes called *Bait-ul Khayal* or others, varying by

region). In these contexts, the individual formally accepts the Imam's guidance and the tenets of the faith, often reciting the Shia declaration: "*Alīyyun amīru'l-mu'minīn 'Alī Allāh*" (Ali, the Master of the Faithful, is from Allah) – a phrase which Nizari understand as affirming the God-given authority of Ali and, by extension, the Imams <sup>29</sup>. Such initiation reinforces that the journey to salvation is an active partnership: the murīd must consciously commit to the path of the Imam. Thereafter, throughout life, Ismailis renew this commitment by obeying the Imam's directives and by contributing *dasond* (tithe, traditionally 1/8 of one's income) to the community, which is used for the common good and the Imam's charitable initiatives. This financial sacrifice is seen as a discipline of detachment and generosity, purifying one's wealth and intent. It also symbolically acknowledges that all blessings ultimately flow from God through the Imam.

Through these various practices – prayer, ethical living, service, artistic devotion, and allegiance – Nizari Ismailis seek to purify and elevate the soul. The ultimate goal is often described not just as entry to Paradise in a literal sense, but as achieving **spiritual proximity to God** and the beatific vision of the Divine Light. In Nizari theology, heaven and hell can be understood as conditions of the soul: heaven as the soul's enlightenment and closeness to God, hell as the soul's ignorance and remoteness. By following the Imam's guidance (often termed the *Sirāt al-Mustaqīm* or Straight Path in Ismaili speeches), the faithful strive to ensure their souls awaken to divine truth *before* death – a concept alluded to in Ismaili exegesis that "*awakening before physical death is resurrection from the grave of ignorance, and the Resurrector is the Qā'im (Imam) of the Resurrection*" <sup>30</sup>. Thus, the practices of the Tariqah (spiritual path) are all ultimately oriented toward that inner resurrection and salvation.

## Comparative View with Sunni Islam

While Nizari Ismaili theology shares the fundamental Islamic tenets with Sunni Islam – belief in one God, the prophecy of Muhammad, the authority of the Qur'an, and the reality of the Day of Judgment – it differs significantly in its understanding of religious authority, the source of guidance, and the means of salvation. A comparative look highlights these differences as well as some common ground:

**Scriptural Interpretation and Authority:** In Sunni Islam, after the Prophet Muhammad's passing, religious authority is understood to rest in the Quran and the Sunnah (example) of the Prophet, as interpreted by qualified scholars (*'ulamā*). Sunnis traditionally believe that with the end of prophethood, no person holds divinely guided status; instead, guidance is accessed through collective scholarship and the consensus (*ijmā'*) of the community. Salvation in Sunni doctrine is achieved through correct faith (*īmān*), observance of the Sharī'a (Islamic law as derived from scripture), and the mercy of God. There is no concept of a living imam who must be obeyed for one's faith to be complete – indeed, *any* righteous Muslim who follows the Quran and Sunnah can hope for salvation by God's grace. By contrast, Nizari Ismailis hold that in addition to the Quran and Prophet's teachings, a continuous line of Imams provides authoritative interpretation of the faith. This means that Ismailis have a **living, personal authority** in religion that Sunnis do not acknowledge. Where a Sunni might turn to a learned shaykh or school of law for guidance (while ultimately considering them fallible), an Ismaili turns to the Imam, believing him to be *infallibly guided*. As a result, certain religious practices diverge: for example, Nizari prayer format, fasting norms, and other practices can be adjusted by the Imam's directive, something a Sunni would generally not accept outside the bounds of the established Sharī'a. This divergence stems from the Ismaili principle of *ta'yīd* (divine inspiration) vested in the Imam versus the Sunni principle of *ijtihād* (scholarly reasoning) within the limits of scripture.

**Concept of Salvation and Intercession:** Both Sunnis and Ismailis believe in the afterlife, heaven and hell, and the need for God's forgiveness for salvation. Both agree that on the Day of Judgment, individuals will be

judged according to their faith and deeds. However, Shi'i traditions (including Ismailis) add a significant dimension: the role of the Imams in salvation. In a well-known hadith embraced in Shi'i thought: "Whoever dies without knowing the Imam of his time dies the death of ignorance (jāhiliyya)." Ismailis take this literally – *recognition of the Imam* is essential to true faith and salvation. This is reflected even in eschatological narratives. For instance, in Sunni tradition, when the departed soul is questioned in the grave by angels, the questions are about God ("Who is your Lord?"), religion ("What is your dīn?"), and the Prophet ("Who is your Prophet?"). Shi'i tradition adds a fourth question: "Who is your Imām?", to which the correct answer is the current Imam (for Shi'a) or specifically "Ali" as the wali of God <sup>31</sup>. This indicates that for Ismailis (and Twelver Shi'a), acknowledging the Imam is a criterion of faith even in the hereafter, whereas for Sunnis it is not. Sunnis do revere the historical Imams (like Ali, Hasan, Husayn) as pious figures, but they do not see them as ongoing mediators between man and God. In Sunni creed, the Prophet Muhammad may intercede for believers by God's permission, but otherwise each soul's fate rests on their own faith and Allah's will. Ismaili doctrine, however, envisions the Imam as an intercessor (*wasīla*). Analogies have been drawn between the Imam's role and that of Christ in some Christian theologies – i.e., a savior figure through whom grace is channeled <sup>23</sup>. While Ismailis are careful to maintain God as the ultimate savior, they see the Imam as the necessary medium of God's salvific guidance and mercy, a notion foreign to Sunnism. To a Sunni, the Ismaili insistence on an Imam for salvation might resemble "intercession" at best or unwarranted *shirk* (association of a partner with God) at worst, depending on their understanding. Conversely, to an Ismaili, the Sunni view misses a key component of God's plan for guidance.

**Religious Law and Adaptability:** Sunnis and Nizaris both uphold the general moral and devotional obligations of Islam (prayer, fasting, charity, pilgrimage, etc.), but the Ismaili Imam has the authority to adapt or contextualize practices. For Sunnis, the Sharia as derived from the Quran and hadith is fixed in its essentials; only qualified jurists may interpret it, and innovation (*bid'a*) in rituals is often seen as misguidance. In Nizari practice, the Imam's guidance can lead to modified practices – for example, the form of daily prayer or certain liturgical formulas differ from Sunni practice, instituted historically by the Ismaili Pirs and Imams to suit the community's context. Another instance is the Ismaili tradition of *Dasond* (tithing) at a higher fixed percentage, which is given directly to the Imam's institutions, differing from the Sunni *zakāt* which is generally 2.5% and given to the poor. The philosophy here is that the Imam, as the authority, can regulate communal practice for the benefit of the faithful. Sunnis might view some Ismaili practices as heterodox; for example, the inclusion of Ali's name in the Ismaili shahada ("Alīyullāh" – *Ali is from God* or *Ali of God*) <sup>29</sup> is something Sunnis (and even most other Shi'a) would avoid in the formal testimony of faith. Sunnis stress *tawḥīd* in a very strict sense – no name alongside God's in worship – whereas Ismaili liturgy often pairs devotion to God with devotion to the Imam (seen as devotion *for the sake of* God). This illustrates a broader difference: Sunni Islam is *law-centered* and congregational with less focus on spiritual hierarchy, while Nizari Ismailism is *authority-centered* and hierarchical, with the Imam at the apex of both doctrinal and communal life.

**Mystical Orientation:** It should be noted that Sunni Islam is not monolithic; it includes mystical traditions (Sufism) that share some affinities with Ismaili spirituality. Many Sunnis partake in Sufi orders where devotion to a spiritual guide (shaykh) and pursuit of inner truth are key – conceptually somewhat analogous to devotion to the Imam. Sufi poetry about annihilation in God (*fanā' fi'llāh*) or the "Perfect Man" has parallels with Ismaili spiritual literature on the Imam. However, Sufism remains an optional path in Sunni Islam and the Sufi shaykh is not considered infallible; whereas in Nizari Islam, the Imam combines in himself the roles of ultimate teacher, exemplar, and protector of the esoteric tradition. Another difference is eschatology: Sunnis anticipate the coming of the Mahdi (a just leader at end of times, who Sunnis generally do not identify with any present figure), whereas Nizari Ismailis identify the Imam *himself* as the present

and living Mahdi in each time, at least in a spiritual sense. In Nizari belief, because the Imam is always present, the community is in a sense already guided towards salvation, without needing to wait for an end-times savior figure. Historically, Nizari Ismailis even celebrated a concept of an **eternal spiritual resurrection (Qiyāma)** during the Alamut period (12th century) when Imam Ḥasan ‘Alā dhikrihi al-salām declared that the inner meaning of resurrection was manifest – a notion quite distinct from Sunni expectations of a physical resurrection on Judgment Day <sup>32</sup>. Sunnis strongly rejected such interpretations.

**Commonalities:** Despite these differences, both Nizari Ismailis and Sunnis base their faith on the Quran and the example of Prophet Muhammad. Morally and devotionally, an observer would note that Ismailis pray, fast, give charity, and strive to live righteously much like their Sunni counterparts, though the forms may differ. Both communities believe in God’s oneness and mercy, the guidance of the Quran, and the need to remember God often. Both also ultimately entrust judgment and salvation to God’s hands. A Sunni Muslim might agree with an Ismaili on many ethical issues and values (kindness, honesty, community welfare) – these are Quranic universals. It is in the theological framework explaining how one is guided on that path (through scripture/scholars vs. through the Imam) where the divergence lies. In summary, **Sunni Islam** emphasizes direct accountability of each believer to God guided by prophetic teachings as interpreted through scholarly consensus, whereas **Nizari Ismaili Islam** places the Imam as the locus of guidance and the key to interpreting and living the faith, making adherence to the Imam indispensable for salvation <sup>3</sup>. An illustrative contrast is: a Sunni’s hope of salvation rests on being a faithful Muslim in accordance with the Quran and Sunnah (and they would say “Allah knows best” who is saved), while a Nizari’s hope is deeply tied to *recognizing the Imam* and following his path as the secure way to attain closeness to Allah <sup>19</sup>.

## Conclusion

Nizari Ismaili theology presents a rich, esoteric interpretation of Islam in which the doctrine of salvation is inextricably linked to the continuous guidance of the Imam. The Nizari tradition upholds the core Islamic belief in one transcendent God and the prophethood of Muhammad, yet it extends the principle of divine guidance through the living Imams, regarded as the heirs of the Prophet’s spiritual authority. Salvation, in this perspective, is not a one-time guarantee but a lifelong journey of the soul toward enlightenment (*ma’rifā*) and ultimately the vision of God’s light. This journey is navigated under the leadership of the Imam, who provides the authoritative teaching and example needed to unlock the inner truths of revelation and to live ethically in the world. Classical Ismaili writers like Nasir Khusraw and Nizari Quhistani described the Imam as the key to understanding God’s message and attaining personal salvation <sup>18</sup> <sup>19</sup>, while the modern Imam, Aga Khan IV, continues to stress a message of balance between spiritual devotion and social responsibility, reflecting that the work of salvation encompasses both soul and society <sup>4</sup>.

The practices of the Nizari Ismaili community – from daily prayers and meditation to civic involvement and philanthropy – all tie back to their theology of salvation. Devotional practices cultivate an intimate relationship with the Imam and, through him, with God, aiming for spiritual fulfillment and peace “in both the worlds” <sup>20</sup>. Ethical living and knowledge are viewed as instruments to save the soul from ignorance, consistent with the Ismaili view that ignorance is a form of spiritual death and enlightenment a form of rebirth. The Ismaili Constitution ordained by Aga Khan IV in 1986 encapsulates these ideals by affirming the Imam’s role to “*guide the murids*” in the interpretation of faith and in improving the quality of life <sup>1</sup> <sup>13</sup> – essentially to lead the community along the straight path to salvation.



In comparison to Sunni Islam, Nizari Ismailism offers a more hierarchical and mystically oriented road to salvation, one that relies on allegiance to a living spiritual guide. This has given the Nizari tradition resilience and adaptability, as exemplified in its history of surviving adversity (such as the Alamut period and post-Alamut exile) by focusing on personal salvation and the Imam's guidance <sup>33</sup>. At the same time, it preserves the universal Islamic emphasis on God's mercy and justice: Ismaili prayers, like Sunni prayers, beseech God for forgiveness and Paradise, and ultimately Ismailis, too, rest their hopes on God's grace – they simply believe that grace reaches them through the providence of the Imamat.

In conclusion, Nizari Ismaili theology portrays salvation as a synergistic process between the divine and human. God provides the eternal beacon in the form of the Imam, and the believer, by exercising intellect (*'aql*) and devotion, follows that light to transcend the self and attain nearness to God. It is a doctrine where the **Imam** is central – as interpreter, as intercessor, as exemplar – but always as a means to the greater end that is the vision of God and the fulfillment of the soul's purpose. The legacy of Ismaili sages and the continued guidance of the present Imam together testify to a living tradition aimed at spiritual elevation and harmony in this life and salvation in the hereafter. Through this lens, Nizari Ismailism enriches the tapestry of Islamic thought with its unique understanding of how divine guidance and human striving converge on the path of salvation.

## References

1. C. Alice Hunsberger, *Nasir Khusraw*. The Institute of Ismaili Studies (2022). – Discusses Nasir Khusraw's Ismaili philosophy, noting that God would not send a revelation without a guide, and for Ismailis this guide is the living Imam who is *"divinely inspired, infallible, and perfectly capable of providing guidance in spiritual and worldly affairs,"* serving as a bridge between the material and spiritual realms <sup>18</sup>.
2. Shafique N. Virani, *The Ismailis in the Middle Ages: A History of Survival, a Search for Salvation* (2007). – Cited in a Simerg article, quoting Nizari Quhistani's verse: *"Salvation is to be found in the Imam of the Time... Ever since I found the Imamate... I have known no other guide than the living, everlasting Imam, For in his command, I have found peace in both the worlds."* <sup>19</sup> <sup>20</sup> This highlights the Imam's role as the source of salvation in Nizari piety.
3. *Reading Guide for "Surviving the Mongols: Nizari Quhistani and the Continuity of Ismaili Tradition"*. The Institute of Ismaili Studies (PDF). – Summarizes early Shi'i and Ismaili doctrine: the Imams are *"the inheritors of [the Prophet's] spiritual knowledge, the bearers of the light (nūr) of God and His living proof (ḥujjah) on earth."* Hence, *"allegiance to these Imams... is only through their mediation (shafā'a) that believers can attain knowledge of God and salvation on the Last Day."* <sup>3</sup>
4. *Preamble of the Constitution of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims* (Ordained 1986). – Affirms that *"in accordance with Shi'a doctrine... the Holy Prophet... designated... Ali... to be the first Imam to continue the Ta'wīl and Ta'līm of Allah's final message and to guide the murids,"* and that the Imamatus continues in lineal descent to the present 49th Imam, Aga Khan IV <sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup>.
5. Farhad Daftary (ed.), *Ismā'īlī Shi'ism*, St. Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology (2020). – Explains Ismaili doctrinal concepts, noting that early Ismaili cosmology had *"a soteriological purpose. It aimed at showing that man's salvation depended on his acquisition of... knowledge (gnosis) imparted by God's messengers (nāṭiqs) and their legitimate successors in every era of sacred history."* <sup>16</sup>

6. Simerg (Ismaili heritage site), "Pir Sadr al-Din on the Beatific Vision of the Imam." – Cites a *ginān* by Pir Sadr al-Din which distinguishes *"the beatific vision"* as *"physical meeting with the Imam"* versus *"spiritual recognition of his essence, through which God is recognized."* <sup>21</sup> This illustrates the Ismaili mystical idea that recognizing the Imam inwardly is a means to know God.
7. Oliver Leaman (ed.), *Shi'a Islam – Afterlife and Salvation*, Patheos Library. – Notes that Sunnis and Shi'a agree on basic afterlife features, but *"in the Shiite tradition the [grave angels] also enquire about the Imam a person has believed in"* <sup>31</sup>, reflecting the Shi'i (including Ismaili) emphasis on the Imam as part of faith, unlike Sunnis who focus only on God, religion, and Prophet.
8. Ismaili Gnosis, "The Aga Khan on the Cosmopolitan Ethic and the Unity of the Human Race." – Quotes Aga Khan IV on Quranic teachings: *"It is concerned with the salvation of the soul, but commensurately also with the ethical imperatives which sustain an equitable social order. The Quran's is an inclusive vision of society that gives primacy to nobility of conduct."* <sup>4</sup> This underlines the Nizari view that personal salvation and social ethics are intertwined.
9. Vladimir Ivanow (scholar of Ismailism), as quoted on Ismaili.net forums, "Notes on the Satpanth." – Observes that *"Nizari Ismailism became the religion of personal salvation... The Pir, who is the 'door' (bāb) to the Imam... [is] of paramount importance, because without him no one can attain the knowledge of the Imam, and God... the ordinary mortal is incapable of comprehending the Divine nature, and this could only be done by one who participates in the Divine substance."* <sup>33</sup> <sup>23</sup> This emphasizes the intermediary role of the Imam (and Pir) in accessing the Divine, comparable to the role of Christ in Christianity as a link between God and man.
10. The Ismaili (official website), "Finding the Sacred Within and Around Us." – Discusses the Imam's guidance as blending spiritual and ethical instruction, noting that the Imam's *"Ta'lim lights the murids' path to spiritual enlightenment and vision"* and that he guides his followers in worldly matters to improve society <sup>24</sup> <sup>25</sup>. This reflects the Ismaili ethos of combining devotion with responsible citizenship as part of the faith journey.

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<sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup> Ismaili Constitution « Simerg – Insights from Around the World

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<sup>3</sup> <sup>10</sup> <sup>11</sup> <sup>17</sup> Microsoft Word - Surviving the Mongols7- \_hd\_ \_2\_.doc

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<sup>4</sup> The Aga Khan on the Cosmopolitan Ethic and the Unity of the Human Race

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<sup>5</sup> <sup>18</sup> Nasir Khusraw

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<sup>6</sup> <sup>13</sup> Nizari Isma'ilism - Wikipedia

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<sup>7</sup> <sup>8</sup> <sup>9</sup> <sup>14</sup> <sup>15</sup> <sup>16</sup> Ismā'īlī Shī'ism - St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology

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