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IDEALS AND REALITIES OF ISLAM

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Sunnism and Shi'ism

Twelve-Imam Shi'ism and Isma'ilism

Since every religion addresses a collectivity with varying psychological and spiritual temperaments, it must possess within itself the possibility of different interpretations. By bearing within itself, providentially, several modes of interpretation of the same truth it is able to integrate a multiplicity into unity and to create a religious civilization. In traditional Christianity one finds the Catholic and Orthodox churches, not to speak of the smaller eastern churches such as the Coptic and Maronite. And outside the Abrahamic family there is Buddhism with its two major schools of Mahayana and Theravada—and in addition the Tibetan form. Without the Mahayana, or northern school, it is doubtful whether this tradition could have become dominant in the Far East. Likewise, Hinduism which, like a vast sea, contains within itself numerous spiritual forms, is again divided into the Shaivite and Vaishnavite interpretations to suit different spiritual temperaments.

In Islam, which is a world-wide religion meant for various ethnic and racial types, there also existed from the beginning the possibility of two different perspectives. Sunnism and Shi'ism are both orthodox interpretations of the Islamic revelation contained providentially within Islam in order to enable it to integrate people of different psychological constitutions into itself. Both Sunnism and Shi'ism constitute an integral part of Islamic orthodoxy which existed from the beginning. Shi'ism is not heterodox nor is it a sect although within the world of Shi'ism there have been groups who have deviated from the main orthodoxy and are sects in the real sense.

Neither Shi'ism nor Sunnism is a late revolt against an

established orthodoxy and should therefore not be compared in any way with reform movements in Christianity or Judaism. In fact Sunnism and Shi'ism, belonging both to the total orthodoxy of Islam, do not in any way destroy its unity. The unity of a tradition is not destroyed by different applications of it but by the destruction of its principles and forms as well as its continuity. Being 'the religion of unity' Islam, in fact, displays more homogeneity and less religious diversity than other world-wide religions. Sunnism and Shi'ism are dimensions within Islam placed there not to destroy its unity but to enable a larger humanity and differing spiritual types to participate in it. Both Sunnism and Shi'ism are the assertion of the *Shahādah*, *Lā ilāha ill' Allāh*, expressed in different climates and with a somewhat different spiritual fragrance.

To say that Sunnism and Shi'ism were meant for different spiritual temperaments should not, however, be interpreted strictly in a racial or ethnical sense. One should not think that a particular people has always been solidly Sunni and another Shi'ite. Of course, today the Persians are nearly all Shi'ite while most Arabs and Turks are Sunnis and these ethnic divisions do have a relation with the distribution of Sunnism and Shi'ism in the Muslim world. But it must also be recalled that during the third/tenth and fourth/eleventh centuries the stronghold of Shi'ism was southern Syria and North Africa while Khurasan was the bastion of Sunnism. Such great champions of Sunni Islam as al-Ghazzālī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī were Persians, and Ash'arite theology, which is often called 'orthodox' Sunni theology, had its early foundation and development, to a large extent, in the hands of Persians. Nevertheless, once this point is considered, it can be said with safety that the Persians were generally sympathetic to the cause of Shi'ism from the beginning and it was in this land that, after the Mongol invasion, Shi'ism became gradually more dominant until, with the Safavids, it became the state religion. Without forgetting the large number of Arab and Indo-Pakistani Shi'ites, one can also add that the Persians form the largest body of Shi'ism in the world and Shi'ite Islam has an intimate connection with the Persian soul.

In dealing with Sunnism and Shi'ism in this chapter we shall speak more about Shi'ism, accepting Sunnism as the norm and

background with which it is compared. The reason for this procedure is that Sunni Islam is much better known in the external world than Shi'ism as the West has had more historical contact with Sunnism. In fact nearly every book in European languages concerning Islam studies it from Sunni sources, although, alas, usually not without distortion and prejudice. Shi'ism, and especially the Twelve-imam school, is nearly unknown in European works save for the writings of a very small number of scholars of whom the notable one is Henry Corbin. Moreover, in previous chapters most of what has been said concerns Islam in general and Sunnism in particular, so that it is natural that, in this chapter, after devoting a brief discussion to Sunnism we should turn our attention to Shi'ism whose beliefs we should seek to clarify both in themselves and in relation to Sunnism.

In order to understand the Sunni and Shi'ite perspectives it is necessary to glance at the religious history of Islam, the development of these two dimensions from their common origin and their subsequent history. From an external point of view the difference between Sunnism and Shi'ism concerns the problem of 'successor' to the Prophet as the leader of the community after his death. The two schools may thus be said to have begun as distinct entities when the Prophet finished his earthly career, because it was precisely at this moment that difference of opinion as to his successor arose. A small group believed that such a function must remain in the family of the Prophet and backed 'Ali, whom they believed to have been designated for this role by appointment (*ta'yīn*) and testament (*waṣṣ*). They became known as his 'partisans' (*shī'ah*) while the majority agreed on Abū Bakr on the assumption that the Prophet left no instruction on this matter; they gained the name of 'The People of tradition and the consensus of opinion' (*ahl al-sunnah wa'l-jamā'ah*). But more generally the Shi'ah of 'Ali, in the sense of those who backed and followed him among the companions, already existed during the Prophet's lifetime and there are several references to them in prophetic sayings. Only with the death of the Prophet did they become crystallized as a group distinct from the Sunnis.

But the question also involved the function of the person who was to succeed the Prophet, for surely such a person could not

continue to possess prophetic powers. Thus Sunnism considered the 'successor' of the Prophet to be his *khalīfah* or caliph only in his capacity as the ruler of a newly founded community while the Shi'ites believed that the 'successor' must also be the 'trusted' (*waṣī*) of his esoteric knowledge and the interpreter of the religious sciences. That is why although the difference between Sunnism and Shi'ism appears to be only a political one it is, in reality, more than that. It is also theological. There is a question of both political succession and religious authority.

Some recent works of orientalists have, in fact, tried to reduce the distinction between Sunnism and Shi'ism to a sheer political one. Although this view is to a certain extent true, such a perspective leaves aside the more important religious and theological considerations involved. The question of who was to succeed the Prophet as the leader of the community was combined with two different conceptions of the qualifications of the successor and the meaning of religious authority itself. Sunnism considered the *khalīfah* to be a guardian of the *Shari'ah* in the community, while Shi'ism saw in the 'successor' a spiritual function connected with the esoteric interpretation of the revelation and the inheritance of the Prophet's esoteric teachings. Thereby began the two different interpretations of that one Divine message, two interpretations which nevertheless remain within the total orthodoxy of Islam and are unified in the principles of religion (*uṣūl al-dīn*) and the religious rites, which are the means of grace for saving man and assuring him felicity in the hereafter.

As far as Sunnism is concerned the development of some of its different aspects has already been outlined in previous chapters. The four main Sunni schools of law became established in the third/ninth century and have remained to this day while some of the less popular schools gradually died out. The science of *Ḥadīth* as a distinct discipline began in the second century with a written compilation of the first collection of prophetic sayings under the Umayyad caliph, 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz. It also became a fully established discipline in the third/ninth century when the authoritative collections were assembled. Likewise the religious and grammatical study of the text of the Holy Quran which had been cultivated informally

from the beginning became a well-established discipline from the second century onward.

As for theology whose full discussion requires a separate chapter it began in the second century with the debates over freewill and determinism as well as over the nature of the Quran. The explicit Kharijite and Murji'ite discussions of the relation of faith to works in the second century must also be considered as a beginning for later theological developments. But again it was in the third century that theology in the Sunni world became fully established with the Mu'tazilites who were dominant during the early Abbasid period. As is well known, the Mu'tazilites applied the use of reason to the understanding of the tenets of revelation and arrived at a conception of the Divine Attributes and the Quran which was opposed by the religious community at large so that within a few centuries they disappeared as an influential theological school.

Meanwhile, towards the end of the third century, Abu'l-Hasan al-Ash'ari, who had himself been a Mu'tazilite, rebelled against their views and founded the dominant Ash'arite school of theology. Although the domination of Ash'arism is not as complete as is usually thought, nevertheless, to the extent that theology was cultivated in the Sunni world, the Ash'arite school became the most important force. Opposed to the rationalistic tendency of the Mu'tazilites, Ash'arite theology believed in the subservience of reason to revelation but nevertheless encouraged a rational understanding of the faith. The Maturidi school, which also developed about the same time as Ash'arism, chartered an intermediate course between the Mu'tazilites and Ash'arites and although never widespread has continued to have adherents to the present day.

In addition to these schools of theology which grew in the Sunni world and have been taught in the traditional schools or *madrasas*, one must also remember the role of the teachings of Sufism even in this domain. Not only were some of the early Sufis like al-Muḥāsibī also theologians, but gradually, after the sixth/twelfth century, what one might call 'mystical theology' based on the teachings of the Sufi masters entered into the general field of Sunni theology. Especially after the Mongol invasion, when much of religious education was administered by Sufi organizations, this form of instruction of spiritual

doctrines entered into the curriculum of many religious schools. Henceforth in the Sunni world the teachings of Sufism in its intellectual aspect were often taught combined with the more external and formal Ash'arite theology. There have been many Sufi masters until modern times who have combined the exposition of Sufi doctrine with theology especially Ash'arism.

An important aspect of Sunnism, especially as far as its comparison with Shi'ism is concerned, is political theory. All Sunnis accept the first four caliphs, Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān and 'Alī, as true vice-generals (*khalīfah*) of the Prophet who fulfilled this function in its fullness so that they are called the 'rightly-guided caliphs' (*al-khulafā' al-rāshidūn*). With the establishment of the Umayyad caliphate the name of the institution of caliphate was continued, but in reality the Islamic caliphate was transformed into an Arab kingdom. That is why later Sunni jurists accepted only the first four caliphs as full embodiments of the ideal of caliphate.

The political theory of the caliphate was however elaborately developed gradually even if it was not practically realized to its fullness at the time. The Sunni political theorists when discussing the theory of the caliphate usually referred to it as the imamate by which they meant the office of the person whose duty it was to administer the *Sharī'ah* and act as judge. But since this term is particularly associated with Shi'ism it is better to refer to the Sunni institution as the caliphate and use the term imamate in connection with Shi'ism to avoid confusion.

The earlier Sunni authorities conceived of the caliphate as the legitimate political institution of the Islamic community. As there is only one community (*ummah*) and one Divine Law or *Sharī'ah*, so is there ideally one caliph who rules over the community and whose duty it is to protect the community and administer the *Sharī'ah* in conformity with the view of the '*ulamā'*. Later, when the caliphate became weakened politically and powerful kings ruled over the Muslim world, this theory was somewhat revised to include the caliph, the sultan and the Divine Law. The caliph symbolized the unity of the community and the supremacy of the Divine Law, while the sultan held actual temporal, military and political power and was supposed to enforce and uphold the Law and protect the community. In both its phases, therefore, Sunni political theory is characterized

by the institution of the caliphate whose task is not to interpret the Divine Law and religious matters in general, but to administer the Law and act as judge in accordance with this Law.

It is with respect to the general background of Islam that Shi'ism must be understood. The Shi'ah are those who believe that the right of succession to the Prophet belongs solely to his family and who follow the family of the Prophet (*ahl al-bait*) as their source of inspiration and guidance for the understanding of the Quranic revelation brought by the Prophet. The members of his family are the channel through whom the teachings and the grace, or *barakah*, of the revelation reach the Shi'ah. In a sense one can call Shi'ism the 'Islam of 'Alī', as Sunnism can also in a certain sense be called the 'Islam of Abū Bakr'.

Within this segment of the Islamic community called the Shi'ah there are further distinctions to be made depending upon the number of Imams that are accepted after the Prophet. The main body of Shi'ism, in both number and its centrality within the traditional religious spectrum, is Twelve-imam Shi'ism. Then there is Seven-imam Shi'ism or Isma'ilism and Five-imam Shi'ism or Zaidism. Twelve-imam Shi'ism is the official religion of Persia and the majority of the population belongs to this school. It also constitutes half the population of Iraq and has a substantial following in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Lebanon and certain lands of East Africa. Isma'ilism is more diffuse in its geographic distribution. It has sizeable following in India, Pakistan and East Africa and smaller Isma'ili communities are found in many countries such as Iran, Syria, and Egypt. As for Zaidism, it is found today in the Yemen, where the majority of the population are Zaidis. There are also small groups such as the 'Alawis of Syria and the Druzes of Syria and Lebanon which have branched off from the main body of Shi'ism into heterodox sects. The Shi'ites constitute about a fifth of the total Muslim population, although the influence of Shi'ism on the total intellectual and spiritual life of Islam is much greater than what this quantitative relation might imply.

In this chapter we shall limit our treatment to Twelve-imam Shi'ism and Isma'ilism which are the two most important branches, twelve and seven being, like the days of the weeks and months of the year or the planets and signs of Zodiac, archetypal numbers which determine the rhythm of human

existence. In order to understand their doctrine however, it is helpful first of all to gain some familiarity with their general history.

Upon the death of the Prophet a small group of men like Salmān, Abū Dharr and Miqdād sided with 'Alī, while the majority of the Meccans swore allegiance to Abū Bakr who was thus chosen as caliph. During his caliphate, as well as those of 'Umar and 'Uthmān, the Shi'ites or followers of 'Alī led a quiet life while 'Alī himself retired from public activity and devoted his time to the training and instruction of his disciples who, meanwhile, became more numerous. Then he became himself caliph and for a short period of five years the Shi'ites realized their ideal to which they always look back, although the years of 'Alī's caliphate were full of hardship.

With the establishment of the Umayyad dynasty Shi'ism entered into the most difficult period of its history during which it was openly and secretly opposed and often persecuted. Only the rule of 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz marks an exception to this general trend. Moreover, it was during this period that the grandson of the Prophet, Husain, was massacred in Kerbala marking a tragedy which has coloured the whole subsequent history of Islam and particularly Shi'ism. During the Umayyad period several Shi'ite uprisings did take place which, however, were crushed each time. Yet, this very opposition weighed heavily upon the shoulders of the Umayyads and played a major role in their downfall.

The revolt of Abū Muslim in Khurasan was based on strong Shi'ite sentiment and, in fact, he asked allegiance of the people for the 'House of the Prophet'. Yet, once the Abbasids came to power, their opposition to the Shi'ah was hardly less severe than that of the Umayyads. Only at the beginning of the third Islamic century and especially during the reign of al-Ma'mūn did Shi'ism have the opportunity to function relatively freely, in fact to the extent that the eighth Imam—'Alī al-Ridā—was chosen as the successor of al-Ma'mūn. But after the poisoning and later the death of al-Ma'mūn the situation became difficult once again, to such a degree that the new caliph ordered the tomb of Imam Husain in Kerbala to be destroyed and turned into a field.

The fourth century marks the first period in which Shi'ism

really flourished. The Buyids, who were Shi'ites, controlled all of Persia and wielded power even in Baghdad. The Fatimids meanwhile conquered Egypt and established an Isma'ili caliphate in North Africa that rivalled the Abbasid caliphate in power. Henceforth Shi'ism continued to flourish even after the coming of the Ayyubids and the Seljuqs, both of whom were strong supporters of Sunnism. It is true that in certain regions such as Syria and the Lebanon, the failure of the Fatimids before the Crusaders and the singular success of the Ayyubids, particularly Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, before the same forces, caused Shi'ism to decline in particular areas in favour of Sunnism, but in general between the fifth and ninth century Shi'ism spread gradually, especially in Persia, while it declined in Egypt and North Africa. The Isma'ili movement of Alamut must also be mentioned in this connection although after the Mongol invasion it was outwardly crushed and went underground.

Meanwhile, the success of Twelve-imam Shi'ism can be gauged by the conversion of the Il-Khanid king, Mahmūd Khudābandah, to Shi'ism. Already the background was prepared for the Safavids, who in the tenth/sixteenth century, conquered all of Persia and established Twelve-imam Shi'ism as the state religion. Under them, gradually, all of that country became Shi'ite and continues to be so to the present day. Meanwhile Shi'ism has persisted in the Yemen which was separated from the main current of political events in other Muslim lands. In India, also, sizeable Twelve-imam Shi'ah communities were established and even ruled for some time in the south. Also India eventually provided a base for Isma'ilism whose spiritual centre finally found its home in that land.

In discussing Shi'ism it is logical to begin with the Twelve-imam school because of its centrality and the balance it preserves between the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of the revelation. As far as the intellectual life of Twelve-imam Shi'ism is concerned it can be divided into four periods for the sake of convenience in studying it. This division has, in fact, been carried out by Corbin in his many studies on Shi'ism. The first period is that of the Prophet and Imams stretching from the life-time of the Prophet to the major occultation (*al-ghaybat al-kubrā*) of the Twelfth Imam, or Mahdi, in the year 329/940. During this period, which is unique in the history of Shi'ism, the

Prophet and Imams lived among men whom they instructed in the meaning of the Divine Law as well as the esoteric sciences. Upon the knowledge and experience of this period rests the whole spiritual and religious life of Shi'ism. During this period the Divine Law was revealed through the Prophet and its interpretation made known by the Prophet and the Imams.

The second period may be considered as stretching from the time of occultation of the Mahdi to the Mongol invasion, not only because of the great changes brought about by this event, but also because this last date corresponds to the life of Khwājah Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī. With this remarkable genius, who was an outstanding mathematician, astronomer and philosopher, Shi'ite theology reaches its height. He may, in fact, be considered in many ways as the greatest of the Shi'ite theologians. This period is marked by the appearance of authoritative collections of *Ḥadīth* and religious doctrine which form the very substance of Shi'ite religious life. It begins with Kulainī, the author of the *Uṣūl al-kāfī* which is the most outstanding compilation of the traditions of the Shi'ite Imams. It is also the age of Ibn Bābūyah, Shaikh Muḥid and Muḥammad ibn Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī who are the authors of the main traditional sources of Shi'ite religious sciences. Also during this period Sayyid Sharīf al-Raḍī compiled the sayings of 'Alī in the *Nahj al-balāghah* which after the Quran and prophetic *Ḥadīth* is the most important work in Shi'ism.

The third period, stretching from the Mongol invasion to the establishment of the Safavids, is the most obscure because the sources of this period have not been well studied. Just as the political and social history of this period is not well known, due to the general turmoil of the age and the presence of so many local dynasties, so the details of the religious life of Shi'ism in this age are as yet unknown. It can however be said that in general during this period the school of Naṣīr al-Dīn continued both in theology and philosophy as can be seen by such figures as his students 'Allāmah Ḥillī, one of the most prolific Shi'ite authors, and Quṭb al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī, the well-known philosopher and scientist. Moreover, the Sufi school of Central Asia connected mostly with the name of Najm al-Dīn Kubrā became combined with the school of Ibn 'Arabī often in the bosom of Shi'ism as

can be seen in the works of such a figure as Sa'd al-Dīn Ḥamūyah.

Ibn 'Arabī, the great Sufi master from Andalusia who settled and died in Damascus, exercised an immense influence over Shi'ite gnostics at this time. His doctrine became integrated with Shi'ism in the hands of such men as Sayyid Ḥaidar Amulī, Ibn Abī Jumhūr and Ibn Turkah. Sufi metaphysics was even influential within Shi'ite theology, not to speak of the theosophy (*al-ḥikmat al-ilāhiyah*) which was cultivated at this time in Persia under the influence of the Illuminationist (*ishrāqī*) doctrines of Suhrawardī.

The fourth period, extending from the Safavid period to the present, began with the remarkable Safavid renaissance. Shi'ite law and theology were revived leading finally to the composition of the immense religious encyclopedia, the *Bihār al-anwār*, composed by Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī. Shi'ite religious and metaphysical doctrines found some of their most outstanding expositors in Mir Dāmād, Bahā' al-Dīn al-'Amilī, one of the many Shi'ites from Jabal 'Āmil in Lebanon who had come to Persia, and Sadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī, usually known as Mullā Ṣadrā. This last named, who is perhaps the greatest Islamic philosopher or more correctly theosopher (*hakīm*), founded a new intellectual dimension in Islam, combining the teachings of Ibn 'Arabī, Suhrawardī, Ibn Sinā and Naṣīr al-Dīn in the texture of Shi'ism. Henceforth, Shi'ite learning flourished in Persia and Iraq and also in Lebanon and certain centres in India. The outstanding figures of the Safavid period have had many disciples and followers in the later centuries, men who have kept their religious and intellectual teachings alive to the present day.

As for the history of Isma'ilism, it is more difficult to study because of the esoteric nature of the movement itself and the lack of sources concerning its early life. The information given in standard histories is usually from the point of view of those who opposed Isma'ilism and there are few Isma'ili works on their own early history. Only the '*Uyūn al-akhbār*' of the Yemeni *dā'ī*, Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn, and a few extant works of similar nature represent the Isma'ili point of view itself. That is why Muslim and Western scholars alike have not been able to agree on many important problems of early Isma'ilism.

Of course the earliest history of Isma'ilism is the same as that of Twelve-imam Shi'ism because up to the sixth Imam, Ja'far al-Šādiq, there is essentially one body of Shi'ites. Upon the death of this Imam, however, the Twelvers accepted Imam Mūsā al-Kāẓim whom Imam Ja'far had himself chosen as Imam, while the Isma'ilis followed his older son, Ismā'il, who had been chosen earlier but had died while Imam Ja'far was still alive. The followers of Ismā'il and his son Muḥammad were the first Isma'ilis, although among themselves also there existed several different views. Henceforth Twelve-imam Shi'ism and Isma'ilism separated and their histories became distinct. It is of interest to note that although small groups followed the eighth and some of the other Imams, they were never able to gain any substantial support and died out as separate movements. Twelve-imam and Seven-imam Shi'ism continued as the major forms of Shi'ism as if their existence were already guaranteed by the archetypal nature of the numbers with which they were connected.

Scholars of Isma'ilism have distinguished at least four different groups of early Isma'ilis: the early *da'wa* (which is a special Isma'ili term for religious and missionary activity) centred around the personalities of Ismā'il and his son Muḥammad; the *da'wa* in the Yemen and North Africa leading to the establishment of the Fatimid caliphate; the movement in Syria and Mesopotamia in the third/ninth century; and finally, the Qarāmitah movement in Bahrain. Of course all of these movements had certain connections in as much as they propagated some aspect of religious doctrine connected with Isma'ilism. But politically and socially they cannot in any way be identified with each other. In any case, some of these movements were gradually subdued and what emerged was the well-known form of Isma'ilism connected with the name of the Fatimids in North Africa and the famous Isma'ili *da'is* in Persia and other eastern lands of Islam.

As for the history of Isma'ilism, Corbin, one of the most sympathetic interpreters of Isma'ili doctrine in the West, divides it into the five periods which are mentioned here to facilitate our understanding of the development of this school.

(1) The period of the early Imams up to Ismā'il, Muḥammad and Abū'l-Khaṭṭāb.

(2) The period from Muḥammad to 'Ubaid-Allāh al-Mahdī, the founder of the Fatimid caliphate. During this period the Isma'ili imams who were three or four in number were hidden from public eye (*maṣtūr*) although there was much activity in the Yemen and North Africa preparing the way for the establishment of the Fatimids. The idea of being hidden (*maṣtūr*) must not, however, be confused with the occultation (*ghaybah*) of the Twelfth-Imam. The first implies simply being hidden from the eye of the crowd and from public notice while the second means disappearance from the physical world.

(3) The establishment of the Fatimid caliphate until the rule of the eighth caliph, al-Mustansir bi'llāh. During this period Isma'ilism had its own caliphate which was a powerful state competing with the Abbasids for the allegiance of the Muslim world. This period marks also the appearance of the major doctrinal works of Isma'ilism by such outstanding figures as Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, Qāḍī Nu'mān, Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistāni, Ḥamid al-Dīn al-Kirmāni and the celebrated Persian poet and Isma'ili philosopher Nāṣir-i Khusraw.

(4) The period from the eighth caliph to the Mongol invasion, during which Isma'ilism divides into two branches. After the eighth Fatimid caliph the eastern Isma'ilis, who were connected with the movement of Ḥasan al-Šabbāh and Alamut, followed Nizār ibn al-Mustansir and became known as the Nizari branch, while those of Egypt and the Yemen accepted his brother al-Musta'li bi'llāh and became known as the Musta'lis. It is of interest to note, also, that the Druze movement broke away from Isma'ilism shortly before this period and followed the seventh Fatimid caliph, al-Ḥakim bi'llāh, as a 'divine incarnation'. The Musta'li branch of Isma'ilism believed in a hidden imam like Twelve-imam Shi'ism. Its chief *dā'i* resided in the Yemen until the tenth/sixteenth century when he emigrated to India, where the chief of the community is still to be found. The Nizari branch stayed in Persia until its head, the Aga Khan, migrated to India in the nineteenth century. The present Aga Khan is the spiritual leader and imam of this branch of Isma'ilism.

(5) The period of the Mongol invasion marked by the destruction of Isma'ili power in Persia. During this period, whose history is not well known, Isma'ilism went underground and

appeared in many places within Sufi orders. There is, in fact, a definite coming together between Isma'ilism and certain forms of Sufism at this time which, however, has not been well studied. Henceforth Isma'ilism continued as a religious phenomenon without the violent political character of its earlier days. And it is as a religious community that it continues to live in the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent, East Africa, Syria and other regions, the Nizari branch being united and directed by the Aga Khan and the Musta'li branch by the chief *dā'ī* in India.

Concerning the doctrines and beliefs of Shi'ism, it is again appropriate to begin with Twelve-imam Shi'ism, then to turn to Isma'ilism, and finally to the difference between them and also the similarities and differences between Shi'ism and Sunni Islam. The major idea which underlines the whole Twelve-imam Shi'ite perspective—and is in fact shared by Isma'ilism—is the distinction between the exoteric and the esoteric to which we have alluded previously. Every manifestation must be the manifestation of something; every appearance implies a reality which 'appears'. All objectivized reality possesses an exterior and an interior aspect, this reality including not only the world of nature but also revelation which originates from the same source as nature, namely the Divine Origin of all things.

Twelve-imam Shi'ism emphasizes above all else the exoteric (*zāhir*), and the esoteric (*bā'in*), aspects of religion and in this as in many other instances, joins Sufism in its point of view. The *zāhir* cannot exist without the *bā'in* for then there would be nothing to manifest it and give it objective existence. And the *bā'in* could never become objectivized and revealed without the *zāhir*. In this relation there lies the secret of the necessity for the existence of the Imam. A prophet in a religion brings a law from heaven to guide the lives of men. After him the revelation ceases and men are left with a law which corresponds to the exoteric aspect of the revelation. There then must come those who can interpret the inner meaning of the law and the esoteric content of the revelation.

Specifically in Islam the door of prophecy closed with the Prophet Muhammad—upon whom be peace. He was both the exoteric and esoteric source of the revelation but in his function as revealer of Divine legislation he represents the exoteric aspect. After him there must be those who inherited his esoteric function

and whose duty it is to expound the inner meaning of the Divine Law. Just as the function of prophecy, in as much as it concerns the bringing of Divine Legislation, is called *nubuwwah*, so is the function of interpreting its inner meaning to men and preserving a link with the source of the revelation called *wilāyah* in Shi'ism. In general the word *wilāyah* in Arabic, Persian and other Islamic languages means sainthood and the saint is called *walīyallāh* 'the friend of God'. But in the specific context of Shi'ism it refers, not only to the saintly life in general, but to the very function of interpreting the esoteric dimension of the revelation.

The cycle of prophecy (*dā'irat al-nubuwwah*) terminated with the Prophet who was the 'Seal of prophecy'. Henceforth no new revelation will come in the present cycle of humanity. But with the termination of this cycle there began, as already mentioned, what one might call the 'cycle of initiation' (*dā'irat al-wilāyah*), although this translation is not fully adequate to convey the idea of *wilāyah* (or *walāyat* as used in Persian works on Shi'ism). What this second cycle implies is the beginning of a chain of authorities concerned with the esoteric interpretation of the revelation and issuing directly from the Prophet himself who is the source of both the exoteric and the esoteric dimensions. Moreover, this cycle will continue until the Day of Judgment when the historic cycle itself is brought to a close. But as long as man lives on this earth the cycle of *wilāyah* subsists, providing a direct channel to the source of the revelation itself and the means whereby man can perform the fundamental operation of *ta'wil*, of hermeneutic interpretation, of going from the exoteric to the esoteric. This basic process of *ta'wil*, or of journeying from the *zāhir* to the *bā'in*, is made possible only through the presence of the cycle of *wilāyah*. Without it there would be no way of escaping from the prison of limited forms to the abode of the celestial essences.

The person who inaugurates the cycle of *wilāyah*, and whose duty it is in every age to fulfil the function of *wilāyah*, is the Imam, whose figure is so central in Shi'ism. That is why the first Imam, 'Ali, is in fact called *walīyallāh*. In general imam means the person who stands in the front and therefore the leader of the congregational prayers. It is in this sense that this term is usually used in everyday language in Sunnism and

Shi'ism alike, such as when one says so and so is the imam of this or that mosque. It also has an honorific sense meaning one who stands at the head of the religious community. It is in this context a title bestowed on outstanding religious scholars such as Imam al-Ghazzālī or Imam al-Shāfi'ī, etc. As already pointed out it is also used in Sunni political theory to designate the ruler of the Islamic community, the imamate being in this sense synonymous with the caliphate.

But as used specifically in Shi'ism the Imam means that person who is the real ruler of the community and especially the inheritor of the esoteric teachings of the Prophet. He is one who carries the 'Muḥammadan Light' (*al-nūr al-muḥammadi*) within himself, and who fulfils the function of *wilāyah*. As already mentioned, according to both Sufism and Shi'ism there is a prophetic light which has existed from the beginning within the being of every prophet from Adam onwards. It is the source of all prophetic knowledge and is identified with the 'Muḥammadan light' or 'Muḥammadan Reality' (*al-ḥaqīqat al-muḥammadiyyah*), which is the Logos. It is this Light that continues from one cycle of prophecy to another and it is this Light that exists within the Imam, by virtue of whose presence he becomes the Imam.

The Imam who fulfils the function of *wilāyah* is the sustainer of the religious law and the guarantee of its continuation. A prophet brings a Divine Law and then himself leaves the world. There are thus times when the world is without a prophet. But the Imam is always present. The earth can never be devoid of the presence of the imam be he even hidden or unknown. (لا تخلو الأرض من حجة الله) Therefore, once the Prophet of Islam has left the world it is the Imam who, in his continuous presence, sustains and preserves the religion from one period to the next. The Imam is, in fact, the sustainer and interpreter *par excellence* of the revelation. His duty is essentially threefold: to rule over the community of Muslims as the representative of the Prophet, to interpret the religious sciences and the Law to men, especially their inner meaning, and to guide men in the spiritual life. All of these functions the Imam is able to perform because of the presence of the 'Light' within him.

As a result of the presence of this Light the Imam also possesses the quality of inerrancy (*'iṣmah*), in spiritual and

religious matters. He is in his inner nature as pure as the Prophet who is the source of this Light as well as his daughter, Fāṭimah, who is the mother of the Imams through 'Ali. That is why the Prophet, Fāṭimah and the Twelve Imams, are together called 'The Fourteen Pure Ones.' The *'iṣmah* of the Prophet and Imams is the logical consequence of the presence of the 'Muḥammadan Light' within them for it is this 'Light' that is the source of all revelation and ultimately all knowledge. To be guided by this 'Light' is to be protected from error. In fact only one of the many children of each Imam becomes himself the Imam, because only one carries the 'Prophetic Light' within himself. The relation between the Imams is not only a carnal one but, most of all, a spiritual connection based on the passing of this 'Light' from one Imam to another by virtue of which each becomes '*ma'ṣūm*' or 'pure' and gains authority as the sustainer and interpreter of the Divine Law.

The Imams are also the intermediaries between man and God. To ask for their succour in life is to appeal to the channel God has placed before men so as to enable man to return to Him. They are, in this sense, the extension of the personality of the Prophet. Their tombs as well as those of their descendants, the *imāmzādah* in Persian, are visited by pilgrims and are the centres of religious life. Shi'ites from all over the world make pilgrimages to the tombs of 'Ali in Najaf, that of Ḥusain in Karbela, of the seventh and ninth imams in Kazimain, of the last imams in Samarraḥ, of Imam Riḍā in Meshed, of his sister Ḥaṣrat Ma'sūmah in Qum, of the sister of Imam Ḥusain, Sayyidah Zainab, and his daughter, Sayyidah Ruqīyah, in Damascus and to many other sites. In the popular daily life of the Shi'ah these sites fulfil the same function as those of the great saints in the Sunni world such as Mūlay Idris in Fez, Maqām Shaikh Muḥyi al-Dīn ibn 'Arabi in Damascus, the tomb of Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī in Konya, that of Hujwiri in Lahore, the tomb of Mu'in al-Dīn Chishtī in Ajmer, or the shrine of Shaikh 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jilānī in Baghdad. Of course often the two categories of sacred places merge. For example in the Shi'ite world the tombs of Sufi saints who are considered the spiritual progeny of the Imams are visited frequently and in the Sunni world the tombs of the Imams and their descendants are very often visited as tombs of great saints.

The twelve Imams of Shi'ism are as follows:

(1) 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, who is the origin of the imamate and the representative of the esoteric dimension of Islam. According to the Shi'ah he was chosen at Ghadir Khumm by the Prophet as his 'entrusted' (*waṣī*) and successor.

(2) 'Alī's elder son, Imam Ḥasan, who was caliph for a short time after him and who died in Medina after retiring from public life.

(3) His younger son, Imam Ḥusain, who took the field against Yazid, the second Umayyad caliph, and was killed with nearly the whole of his family near Karbela. His martyrdom on the tenth of Muharram (61 A.H.) marks to this day the height of the religious calendar and his tragic death symbolizes fully the ethos of Shi'ism.

(4) Imam 'Alī entitled Zain al-'Ābidīn and al-Sajjād who was the only surviving son of Imam Ḥusain, his mother being the daughter of the last Sassanid king, Yazdigird. He is especially known for his prayers *Ṣaḥīfah sajjādiyyah* which is, after the *Nahj al-balāghah* of 'Alī, the outstanding literary work of the Imams containing some of the most moving lines of religious literature in Arabic. It has even been called 'The Psalm of the Family of Muḥammad'.

(5) Imam Muḥammad al-Bāqir, the son of the fourth Imam, who resided like his father in Medina. Since, at this time, the Umayyad caliphate was faced with internal revolts the Shi'ah were left more free to pursue their religious teachings. Therefore many scholars travelled to Medina to study with the fifth Imam and numerous traditions survive from him.

(6) Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, the son of Imam Muḥammad al-Bāqir, who continued the propagation of Shi'ite sciences to the extent that Shi'ite law is named after him. More traditions are recorded of him and the fifth Imam than all the others combined. Thousands flocked to his religious classes including such well-known Shi'ite figures as Hishām ibn Ḥakam and the alchemist Jābir ibn Ḥayyān. Even Abū Ḥanīfah, the founder of one of the four Sunni schools of law, as well as several other well-known Sunni scholars studied with him. It is also with Imam Ja'far that Isma'ilism separated from Twelve-imam Shi'ism, the question of the successor to the sixth Imam having been made particularly difficult by the fact that the Abbasid

caliph al-Manṣūr had decided to put to death whoever was to be chosen officially by the sixth Imam as his successor thereby hoping to put an end to the Shi'ite movement.

(7) Imam Mūsā al-Kāzīm, the son of Imam Ja'far, who faced extreme hardship due to the renewed opposition of the caliphate, this time the Abbasid, against the Shi'ites. He lived much of his life in hiding in Medina until Hārūn al-Rashid had him imprisoned and brought to Baghdad where nearby, he died. Henceforth the Imams all lived in the vicinity of the caliph and left Medina as their permanent abode.

(8) Imam 'Alī al-Riḍā, the son of Imam Mūsā al-Kāzīm, who was called by al-Ma'mūn to Marw in Khurasan where he was chosen as the successor to the caliphate. But his immense popularity and the rapid growth of Shi'ism in that region turned the caliph against him, and he was finally removed and buried in Tus or the modern city of Meshed which is today the foremost religious city in Persia. Imam Riḍā participated in many of the scholarly gatherings of al-Ma'mūn and his debates with theologians of other religions are recorded in Shi'ite sources. He is also the origin of many Sufi orders and is even called the 'Imam of initiation'.

(9) Imam Muḥammad al-Taḳī, the son of Imam Riḍā, spent his life in Medina as long as al-Ma'mūn was alive, even though al-Ma'mūn, in order to keep him in Baghdad, had given his own daughter to him in marriage. Upon al-Ma'mūn's death he returned to Baghdad where he died.

(10) Imam 'Alī al-Naḳī, the son of the ninth Imam, who resided in Medina until al-Mutawakkil became caliph and invited him to come to Samarra, the seat of the caliphate. But there he was very harsh with the Imam as a result of his general extreme anti-Shi'ite policy. The Imam endured the hardship until the caliph's death but did not return to Medina afterwards. He died in Samarra where his tomb and that of his son are to be found today.

(11) Imam Ḥasan al-'Askarī, the son of Imam 'Alī al-Naḳī, who lived in extreme secrecy in Samarra and was closely guarded by the agents of the caliph because it was known that the Shi'ites believed his son to be the Mahdi. He married the daughter of the Byzantine emperor, Nargis Khātūn, who had embraced Islam and sold herself into slavery in order to enter

the household of the Imam, and from this marriage the twelfth Imam was born.

(12) Imam Muhammad al-Mahdi entitled *Ṣāhib al-zamān*, who is the last Shi'ite Imam, went into minor occultation upon the death of his father. From 260/873 to 329/940 he had four representatives (*nā'ib*) to whom he appeared from time to time and through whom he ruled the Shi'ite community. This period is thus called the minor occultation (*al-ghaibat al-sughrā*). Henceforth, there began the major occultation (*al-ghaibat al-kubrā*) which still endures. During this time, according to the Shi'ah, the Mahdi is alive but invisible. He is the *axis mundi*, the invisible ruler of the Universe. Before the end of time he will appear again on earth to bring equity and justice and to fill it with peace after it has been torn by war and injustice. The Mahdi is an ever-living spiritual being who guides in the spiritual path those who ask him and whose succour all the devout ask in their daily prayers. He who is spiritually qualified is, in fact, in inner contact with the Mahdi.

The twelve Imams are like the twelve constellations of the zodiac in the spiritual firmament. At their centre stands the Prophet, the sun whose light illumines these constellations. The Imams are, for the Shi'ah, a part and continuation of the spiritual reality of the Prophet and together with him, who is their source and origin in both the metaphysical and biological sense, determine the contours of that spiritual universe in which the Shi'ah live.

As far as the political aspect of Twelve-imam Shi'ism is concerned, it is directly connected with the personality of the Imam. The perfect government is that of the Imam, one which will be realized with the coming of the Mahdi who even now is the invisible ruler of the world but does not manifest himself directly in human society. In his absence every form of government is of necessity imperfect, for the imperfection of men is reflected in their political institutions. The Shi'ites, especially of Persia since the Safavid period and even before, have considered the monarchy as the least imperfect form of government in such conditions. But there have even been some like the Indian Shi'ites, Amir Ali and Tayyibji, who supported the Sunni caliphate on a purely political level although Shi'ism does not accept the caliphate in the usual sense as the legitimate

Muslim political authority. Here a distinction must be made between the ideal political ruler which Shi'ism sees in the person of the Imam and Sunnism in the caliph and acceptance of an existing situation. In the latter case there have been Shi'ites who have paid allegiance to the caliphate and even supported it. But the structure of political theory is different in the two cases, especially as it concerns the caliphate.

The distrust of all worldly government after the disappearance of the Mahdi and the early experience of the Shi'ite community made Twelve-imam Shi'ism apathetic towards political life. This is one of the features that distinguishes it from both Sunnism and Isma'ilism. The Twelvers or Imamites remained content with being observers of the political scene rather than the originators of political movements.

It must be remembered that the Safavid movement itself, which represents the one instance of major political victory for Twelve-imam Shi'ism, did not begin as a purely Shi'ite movement in the restricted sense of the word. The Safavids were a Sufi order which became so well organized and so powerful that it was able to exercise actual political authority and finally conquer all of Persia. Of course, then the Safavids made Shi'ism the state religion, but the movement itself began from a Sufi order. Furthermore, even the engagement of Twelve-imam Shi'ism in political life, made necessary by the new situation in Safavid Persia, did not completely remove the traditional distrust of the Shi'ite '*ulamā*' towards all government. It is an attitude that persists in certain quarters to this very day.

The withdrawal of the Shi'ites from political life should not however be interpreted as their withdrawal from the life of the community. On the contrary, this very apathy towards politics intensified the religious and scholarly activity of the Shi'ah. For centuries, freed from the burden and responsibility of political life, they devoted themselves wholeheartedly to the cultivation of the religious sciences and the arts and sciences in general. Most of the early Muslim educational institutions were established by the Shi'ah as were many branches of the traditional sciences. Therefore, although politically aloof, Twelve-imam Shi'ism made an immense contribution to the life of the Islamic community in domains that were more connected with the knowledge of things rather than the ruling of men.

On the other hand, the other important branch of Shi'ism, namely Isma'ilism, was marked from the beginning by an intense interest in political life and was even a revolutionary force. In this domain it has stood opposed to the view of Twelve-imam Shi'ism, but in many other questions it shares the world view of the Twelvers. Isma'ilism also emphasizes the existence of two aspects to all things, the exoteric and the esoteric. It distinguishes between the *naḥī* and *walī*, the first representing the Law and the other its esoteric meaning. But whereas Twelve-imam Shi'ism preserves a balance between the exoteric and the esoteric, Isma'ilism tends to emphasize the esoteric over the exoteric and elevate the rank of the *walī* to a degree that is not found in Twelve-imam Shi'ism. The name Bātin sometimes given to the Isma'ilis is as a result of their emphasis upon the esoteric or *bāṭin*.

Of great interest is the identification of the esoteric dimension of the religion, or *bāṭin*, by Isma'ilism with theosophy (*ḥikmah*), which is also called *dīn-i ḥaqq* (the religion of the truth), in Persian. If the Persian term has been used it is because the vast majority of Isma'ilis works on theosophy are in Persian. Nāṣir-i Khusraw, who is perhaps the greatest Isma'ilī philosopher, wrote every one of his works in Persian. In fact, Isma'ilī philosophy is one of the few branches of Islamic philosophy in which the Persian texts are even more numerous than the Arabic.

Isma'ilism believes that this philosophy, or theosophy, contained in the *bāṭin* of religion leads to spiritual rebirth (*wilādat-i rūḥānī*) through which man is transformed and 'saved'. What they mean by philosophy is therefore quite different from the subject known by that name today. Much of modern philosophy is in fact not at all a 'love of wisdom' but a hatred of it so that it should appropriately be called 'misosophy'. By philosophy the Isma'ilis meant a *sophia* which was not just a mental play but a doctrine of a metaphysical and cosmological order closely connected with means of its realization.

It is not accidental that whenever Isma'ilism was strong a sudden burst of activity in the arts and sciences, and specially the intellectual sciences, took place. This connection can more-over be seen with respect to Shi'ism in general. The al-Azhar University which today is the most famous seat of learning in

the Sunni world was founded by the Fatimids. The intense activity in the 'intellectual sciences' (*al-'ulūm al-'aqliyah*) in Fatimid Egypt, shown by the presence of so many outstanding men of science such as Ibn al-Haitham and Ibn Yūnus, is directly connected with the religious structure of Isma'ilism itself. It is connected with the concept of *ḥikmah* in Isma'ilism and its direct relation with revelation.

Isma'ilism contains an elaborate metaphysics, cosmology and spiritual anthropology. In metaphysics it emphasizes Unity (*taḥwīd*) keeping a mid-way position between *ta'ṭīl* and *tashbīḥ*; that is, between considering the Divine as an abstract unity by refusing man the ability of understanding the meaning of His Qualities and Attributes, or by describing the Divine anthropomorphically, by comparing His Qualities and Attributes to human ones. In this fundamental point therefore it joins the view of the rest of Islamic orthodoxy.

According to Isma'ilī doctrine the Origin of all things is not Pure Being but the Reality that transcends even Being and is called *Mubdī*. He through Whose Original Act the chain of being is created. Islamic philosophy in general begins with being and is concerned with the nature of God or the Origin of the Universe as Pure Being. In Sufi metaphysics, however, the Divine Essence (*al-dhāt*) is Absolute and Infinite above all determinations, even that of Being, which is its first self-determination and the Principle of creation. Isma'ilī doctrine thus joins Sufi metaphysics and Oriental metaphysics in general by considering the Supreme Principle to be at once Being and above Being. Its primordial act brings into being the order of universal existence.

The first being in the created order is the First Intellect, or Universal Intellect, which is identified with the Divine Word. It is a reality that at once veils and reveals the Supreme Name, Allah. From this highest spiritual reality, which has its own limit (*ḥadd*), there comes into being the Second Intellect and from the Second Intellect the Third Intellect which, in Isma'ilism, is identified with the Spiritual Adam (*Ādam-i rūḥānī*). This Intellect is the angelic prototype of humanity. It is the celestial Imam who is the archetype of the terrestrial Adam and of all men. The life and drama of man on earth is but a reflection of his celestial reality.

The Third Intellect, or Spiritual Adam, sought to reach the Supreme Principle without observing the proper hierarchy of the archangelic worlds above him. He committed an act of idolatry, from the metaphysical point of view, as a result of which he fell into a state of forgetfulness and stupor. Once he came to himself he realized that he had been punished by God and removed to the rank of the Tenth Intellect. He had been removed from his original abode by 'Seven spiritual worlds' which came as a result of his forgetfulness. These seven worlds are the prototypes of this world. That is why everything is governed by the cycle of seven. This world was created in order to enable man to regain his lost state, to be delivered from his own 'shadows'. And being based on its celestial model it consists of seven heavens, seven earths, seven cycles of prophecy and seven imams.

Time in which man is situated is itself 'retarded eternity', an image of the retardation caused by man's fall from the Third to the Tenth Intellect. In this spiritual anthropology time itself has a trans-historic significance being based on the forgetfulness of man which is the cause of his having fallen into the domain of time, decay and death. Separation from God comes from man's forgetfulness, a point of view that is central to Islam in general and emphasized in Sufism.

Isma'ilism has a cyclic conception of history closely allied to its metaphysical conception of time. Although a cyclic conception of time is implied in certain Twelve-imam Shi'ite sources—cyclic not in the sense of ever recurring sets of events but of other historic cycles than the present one—it is nowhere as much emphasized as in Isma'ilism. The Isma'ili works speak of a large cycle of aeons sometimes mentioned as of 360,000 years within which there are seven cycles of prophecy. Each cycle is commenced by a prophet (*nabi*) who has his esoteric representative or imam who dominates over that cycle, the seventh bringing the cycle to an end. The prophets and their imams for the present cycle of humanity are mentioned usually as:

Adam	Seth
Noah	Shem
Abraham	Ishmael
Moses	Aaron

Jesus
Muhammad

Simon
'Ali

The seventh is the Mahdi or 'Imam of Resurrection', who does not bring a new *Shari'ah* but reveals the inner meaning of all revelations and prepares the coming of the new cycle. Moreover, the historical cycles alter between that of epiphany and occultation, between a period when the truth is revealed and one in which it is hidden, this alteration continuing until the end of the great cycle. At this moment comes the 'Great Resurrection' (*qiyāmat al-qiyāmah*) upon which man and his celestial prototype are re-instated in their original condition. Thus through the prophets and imams the purpose of creation is fulfilled and man regains the state that he lost through his own negligence.

If one wishes to compare Twelve-imam Shi'ism and Isma'ilism it can be said that they share together, besides the general tenets of Islam, the basis concept of the imam; the esoteric and esoteric dimensions of religion and *ta'wil* that is based on them. The first six Imams are of course also common between them with all that such a common ground implies. As far as the differences between them are considered there is first of all the fact that one accepts twelve Imams and the other seven. For example, a figure like the eighth Imam, 'Ali al-Riḍā, who plays such a major role in the life of the Shi'ah does not exist in the same capacity in the Isma'ili scheme. Also for the Twelvers the twelfth Imam, the Mahdi, is in occultation although alive, while the imam of Isma'ilism, at least the Nizari branch, is always living and present on earth among men. The idea of awaiting the appearance of the Imam (*inṭizār*) which is so important to the religious psychology of Twelve-imam Shi'ism therefore does not exist in the same sense in Isma'ilism.

The political nature of Isma'ilism and the apolitical nature of Twelve-imam Shi'ism is another distinguishing feature of these two groups as already pointed out. It appears as a paradox of history that Isma'ilism, which played such an important role in the social and political movements during the early centuries of Islamic history, should become today free of direct political association while Twelve-imam Shi'ism, which had remained aloof from political life, should be thrown in the middle of the

political arena with the establishment of the Safavid dynasty. Therefore, as far as their historical careers are concerned both Twelve-imam Shi'ism and Isma'ilism have experienced direct engagement in political life. But the theological role of political action in the two communities does remain different in as much as in one the Imam is absent and in the other living among men.

Finally another distinguishing feature is the role of exotericism and esotericism. Twelve-imam Shi'ism goes to great length to emphasize the necessity of preserving a balance between the two. Even the role of the Imam is considered in both its exoteric and esoteric aspect. Isma'ilism however, especially that of Alamut, tended to emphasize the *bâtin* or esoteric dimension above all else. Of course in the daily life of the community the exoteric elements persist for no general community of men can be simply esotericists. But the accent is somewhat different although the basic concept of the imamate exists in these two major branches of Shi'ism which are united in their belief in the imam and particular reverence for the family of the Prophet.

Concerning the differences and similarities between Shi'ism and Sunnism it can be said that, first of all, there is the difference of view concerning political rule, from the question of the political successor of the Prophet to the later institution of the general attitude of the Shi'ah towards the powers of the world and especially concerning the attitude of the '*ulamā*' towards established political authority. The Sunni '*ulamā*' have throughout history tended to support the existing political institutions in fear of creating civil strife while the Shi'ite '*ulamā*', basing their views on the role of the Imamate and the ideal rule of the Imam, have distrusted all political institutions and kept away from political authorities.

There is also a distinction between the question of intermediaries between man and God. The modern puritanical movements in the Islamic world which emphasize only the transcendence of God and discourage all intermediaries between man and God present a view that is opposed to the religious psychology of Shi'ism. But in traditional Sunnism there are intermediaries in daily religious life, the role of the intermediary being fulfilled by the Prophet and also by the saints. In Shi'ism the Prophet and the Imams together fulfil this function. In fact, in so many ways, what the traditional Sunni, especially he who

is touched by the spirit of Sufism, sees in the person of the Prophet the Shi'ite sees in the Prophet and Imams together. This is demonstrated by the fact that the litanies and chants in the name of the Prophet common in the Sunni world correspond, even in content, to those that the Shi'ah perform for the Prophet and Imams together. Nevertheless on the theological level there is some difference concerning the role of the intermediary between man and God, not that of course man prays to anyone other than to God in Shi'ite Islam any more than he does in Sunnism.

In Islam man stands before God as his vice-gent on earth. It is, however, in seeking to approach him that he needs the spiritual intermediaries who are the Prophet, Imams and the saints. For his daily religious life the Shi'ite believer has no more need of human intermediaries between him and God than does the Sunni. Every Muslim is himself a priest, be he Sunni or Shi'ah. The presence of 'intermediaries' in Shi'ism or Sunnism is a matter concerning the inner religious life and does not in any way alter the structure of Islam as a religion without a specific priesthood or religious hierarchy which would act as intermediaries between man and God in religious rites and acts of worship.

In the field of law the difference between Sunnism and Shi'ism lies in the question of *ijtihād*. Since in Shi'ism the Imam is alive, the possibility of applying the Divine Law to new situations is always present. In fact the *mujtahid* (he who can exercise his opinion) who is in inner contact with the Imam must in each generation apply the Law to the new conditions which that generation faces. This does not, of course, mean to change the Law for the sake of circumstances but to extend it to cover any new situations that might arise. And it is the duty of each Shi'ite to follow the rulings of a living *mujtahid*. In Sunni Islam, since the third century, the gates of *ijtihād* have been closed although here again the opinions or *fatwās* of the '*ulamā*' over the ages have to a certain extent provided a continuous commentary upon the *Shari'ah*.

In the official theological formulations of Sunnism and Shi'ism there is some difference in approach and content. Sunni theology may be characterized as more concerned with 'rational' aspects of the faith and Shi'ite theology with the

'mystical', in the sense that Sunni theology does not concern itself as much with esoteric questions as does Shi'ite theology. But here again Sufi doctrine, which is often combined with theology in the Sunni world, does provide an esoteric dimension even in the exoteric domain. Also, Shi'ite theology is more sympathetic to the arts and sciences and the 'intellectual sciences' (*al-'ulūm al-'aqliyah*) than is Ash'arite theology. This difference is seen in the ups and downs of the career of these sciences over the centuries which have depended on the political domination of one group or another.

Finally, as far as differences between Sunnism and Shi'ism are concerned, it can be said that in one the *barakah* or grace of the Prophet is felt and realized through all the companions of the Prophet including his family, while in Shi'ism it is felt primarily in the family of the Prophet (*ahl al-bait*). What the companions (*ṣaḥābah*), and the family (*āl*), mean for the Sunni, the family (*āl*) in themselves means to the Shi'ah. This is even seen in the two forms of benediction upon the Prophet prevalent among the two groups. It is not that the family of the Prophet do not hold a special place in Sunnism or that the companions are unimportant in Shi'ism. But in one case one sees Islam through the whole community that surrounded the founder, and in the other through a particular elite which is his family and those who were spiritually related to him like Salmān al-Fārsī about whom the Prophet said: 'Salmān is a member of my household.' Here again it is a matter of emphasis and difference of interpretation of a single reality rather than total opposition.

As against these differences there are numerous points of similarity between Sunnism and Shi'ism which far outweigh the differences and only prove that they are two branches of the same tree. Sunni and Shi'ite Islam are united in the Quran and the Prophet, the foundation of all of Islam. They share in the principles of religion, namely in the basic doctrines of *tawḥīd* (unity), *nubuwwah* (prophecy) and eschatology (*ma'ād*). They also agree to the fact that God must be just although one emphasizes the aspect of freedom and the other necessity. One believes that whatever God does it is that which is just, while the other emphasizes that God could not be unjust. The agreement of Sunnism and Shi'ism on the principles of religion is what places them within the total orthodoxy of Islam and

guarantees the presence of the basic principles of the doctrine in the formulation of both groups.

On the level of religious practice also Sunnism and Shi'ism are nearly the same. The day-to-day practice of the *Shari'ah* is the same in both worlds. Except for one or two points, such as the amount of inheritance of the female side or temporary marriages, the rulings of the *Shari'ah* are common to them. And in practice, the prayers, ablutions, fasting, the pilgrimage, etc. are the same save for minor differences which in the prayers are no more than the differences between the four Sunni schools of law. Only the Shi'ites add two further phrases to the call to prayers, one affirming the *wilāyah* of 'Alī and the other the importance of good works. Also, because the Imam is absent, the Shi'ites do not emphasize the Friday prayers to the same degree as the Sunnis and it lacks especially the political significance that it possesses in the Sunni world. The similarities of daily practices based on the *Shari'ah*, from the prohibition of alcohol and pork to ways of sacrificing an animal, are so many that they cannot be enumerated here.

The similarity between Sunnism and Shi'ism in daily practice is far greater than a comparison of theological texts might show. If Shi'ism is the 'Islam of 'Alī', the *barakah* of 'Alī is also spread in the Sunni world through the presence of the Sufi orders of which he is the 'imam' even for Sunnis, and the social ramifications of these orders in guilds, orders of chivalry, etc. If one compares the daily life of a traditional Sunni, which is based on the *Shari'ah* and punctuated with visits to the tombs of saints, reading of prayers and litanies usually written by Sufi masters like 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī and Abu'l-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī, with the daily life of the Shi'ites, one is struck by the profound resemblances. The function of the Imams and their descendants in the Shi'ite world is fulfilled in the Sunni world by the saints, who are in fact in a metaphysical sense the spiritual progeny of the Prophet and the Imams. The names of many of the Imams appear in the chain of transmission (*silsilah*) of every Sufi order. This essential identity can be 'existentially' experienced in the presence of the *barakah* of the tombs of Sufi saints on the one hand and of the Imams and their descendants on the other, although of course the particular perfume of each can be recognized.

In conclusion it can be said that Sunnism and Shi'ism are two orthodox dimensions of Islam providentially placed in this tradition to enable collectivities of different psychological and spiritual temperament to become integrated within the Islamic community. Being each an affirmation of the doctrine of unity they do not in themselves destroy the profound unity of Islam whatever their formal differences may be. They are rather two ways of asserting the truth of the *Shahādah*, *Lā ilāha ill' Allāh*. They are two streams which originate from the same fountain, which is their unique source, namely, the Quranic revelation. And they finally pour into one sea which is the Divine Unity whose means of realization each contains within itself. To have lived either of them fully is to have lived as a Muslim and to have realized that Truth for the sake of whose revelation the Quran was made known to men through the Prophet of Islam.

wa'llāhu a'lām.

Suggestions for further reading

- Chapman, J. A. (trans.), *Maxims of Ali*, Lahore, Muhammad Ashraf.
- An English translation of some of the sayings of Ali whose totality is found in the *Nahj al-balāghah*.
- Corbin, H., *En Islam iranien*, 4 vols., Paris Gallimard, 1971-72.
- A monumental work summarizing a life-time of research on Islam in Persia. The first volume contains a detailed study of Shi'ism in its esoteric and metaphysical aspects while the third volume is devoted to Sufism in its various manifestations in Persia.
- Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, Part II. A penetrating description of both Twelve-imam Shi'ism and Isma'ilism concentrating especially on the exposition of their metaphysical doctrines with some attention given to their religious history.
- L'Imām caché et la rénovation de l'homme en théologie shi'ite*, *Eranos Jahrbuch*, (Zurich), XXVIII, 1959. Contains a profound study of the figure of the Twelfth Imam and his role in the spiritual life in Shi'ism.
- Pour une morphologie de la spiritualité shi'ite*, *Eranos Jahrbuch*, XXIX, 1960. A general study of the structure of Shi'ite spirituality carried out with much sympathy for the Shi'ite perspective.
- Le Combat spirituel du shi'isme*, *Eranos Jahrbuch*, XXX, 1961. The role of the Imam in the inner spiritual life of Shi'ism.
- An "pays" de l'Imām caché*, *Eranos Jahrbuch* XXXII, 1963. A description of the 'intermediate' spiritual world or the 'eighth

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- climate' which is the abode of the Hidden Imam and the meaning of this world for the spiritual life.
- Corbin, H., *Le Temps cyclique dans le mazdéisme et dans l'ismlisme*, *Eranos Jahrbuch*, XXI, 1951. The concept of cyclic time in Isma'ilism analyzed and compared with Mazdaean ideas on time.
- (ed. and trans.) *Trilogie ismailienne*, Tehran, Institut Franco-Iranien, 1961. The text and French translation of three works of different periods connected with Isma'ilism as well as Shi'ism and Sufism with a comparative study by Corbin of these three aspects of Islam.
- al-Hill, 'Allāmah Hasan b. Yūsuf, (trans. W. M. Miller) *Al-bāb al-hādī 'ashar: a Treatise on the Principles of Shi'ite Theology*, London, Royal Asiatic Society, 1928. The translation of one of the most popular summaries of Twelve-imam Shi'ite theology which has served as a standard text in religious schools for centuries.
- Hollister, J. N., *The Shi'a of India*, London, Luzac, 1953. A historical survey of Shi'ism in India containing also a general study of Shi'ite doctrines and beliefs.
- Ibn Bābawaih, trans. A. A. Fyze, *A Shi'ite Creed*, London, Oxford University Press, 1952. A literal translation of an authoritative traditional statement of Shi'ite beliefs.
- Ivanow, W., *Isma'ili Literature, A Bibliographical Survey*, Tehran, University Press, 1963. A thorough survey of Isma'ili works compiled by one of the leading expositors of Isma'ili doctrine and history.
- Studies in Early Persian Ismailism*, Leiden, Brill, 1948. A historical outline of the early phases of the Isma'ili movement in Persia.
- (ed. and trans.), *Kalāmī Pīr, a Treatise on Isma'ili Doctrine*, Bombay, Ismaili Society, 1955. An English translation of a standard statement of Isma'ili beliefs of the later period after the Alamut reform.
- Massignou, L., *Salmān Pāk et les prémisses spirituelles de l'Islam iranien*, Paris, Société des Etudes Iraniques, 1934. A monograph on the significance of Salmān for Shi'ite Islam containing profound observations on the role of this figure in the religious consciousness of the Persians.
- Die Ursprünge und die Bedeutung des Gnostizismus in Islam*, *Eranos-Jahrbuch*, 1937. Gnostic doctrines of Isma'ilism considered in their origin and significance.
- Nāsir-i Khusrāw, *Le 'Livre réunissant les deux sagesse' ou harmonie de la philosophie grecque et de la théosophie ismailienne*, ed. and trans. H. Corbin and M. Mo'in, Tehran, Institut Franco-Iranien, 1953.
- The Persian text with French translation of the outstanding philosophical work of Nāsir-i Khusrāw containing a long introduction by Corbin on Isma'ili philosophy.
- Naar, S. H., *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1964. An analysis of the cosmological aspect of the *Epistles* of the Ikhwān al-Safā' which is associated with the Shi'ite point of view and a discussion of the relation of Shi'ism to the arts and sciences in Islam.

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Salmin, Muhammad Ali al-Haj, *Ali the Caliph*, Bangalore, Modi Power Printing Works, 1931. An account of the life and teachings of Ali from the traditional point of view and the translation of some of his sayings and sermons.

Strothmann, R., *Die Zwölfer Schi'a. Zwei religionsgeschichtliche Charakterbilder aus der Mongolenzeit*, Leipzig, Harrassowitz, 1926. A noteworthy study of two leading Shi'ite theologians through whom the general religious structure of Shi'ism is described.

—*Gnosis-Texte der Ismailiten*, Göttingen, Akademie der Wissenschaft, 1943. A translation with commentary of some important Isma'ili metaphysical texts.

al-Tūsī, Naṣīr, al-Dīn, ed. and trans. W. Ivanow, *Rawḍat al-taṣlīm* or *Taṣawwufāt*, Leiden, Brill, 1950. An English translation of a summary of Isma'ili beliefs after the Alamut reform by the outstanding Twelve-imam Shi'ite theologian, al-Tūsī, when he was in the bondage of Isma'ili rulers in Khurasan.