

Chapter VIII

Shī'ī Islam and its Later Development

Shī'ism has remarkably influenced the destinies of Islam in two ways: in the political field and, more particularly, in the theosophical domain. Shī'ism is a way to understand and live Islam that goes back to the time of Prophet Muhammad. The Arabic word *Shī'a*, rendered in English as "Shī'ism", derives from the root meaning to follow, to accompany. The *Shī'a* consists of all the followers of the school (there is, for example, the *Shī'a* of Plato). In the strict sense of the word, *Shī'a* applies mainly to the faithful who believe in the mission of Imāms (spiritual Guides) who succeeded the first Imām 'Alī. The Shī'ites are mainly subdivided into three branches: the Zaydī(s), the Twelver Shī'ites, and the Ismā'īlī(s).

The major branch of the Shī'ites, the Twelver Shī'ites (Ithnā 'Ashariyya) recognize twelve Imāms, the last (Muhammad al-Mahdī) having disappeared in the IXth century. The eleventh Imām Hasan al-'Askarī died in 260/874. According to their doctrine, the Twelfth Imām Muhammad al-Mahdī did not die but God concealed him from people's eyes. He is still living presently on earth, until the end of time, when he will reappear to fill the world with justice. Before being concealed, the Twelfth Imām appointed four *saḡīr*(s) (ambassadors) to represent him during the Lesser Occultation (*al-Ghayba al-Suḡhrā*). When the last *saḡīr* Abū al-Husayn 'Alī ibn Muhammad al-Samarī died in 329/941, the Greater Occultation (*al-Ghayba al-Kubrā*) began. Since that time, the Shī'ī religious leaders ('*ulamā'*) pretend to interpret the doctrine under the putative guidance of the Imām. The Twelver Shī'ites are found mainly in Iran, 'Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, India, Pakistan, Europe, and America.

At the end of his life, the sixth Imām, Ja'far al-Sādiq (d.147/765), appointed his eldest son Ismā'īl as his Successor. But according to the Twelver Shī'ī viewpoint, Ismā'īl died suddenly, so the Imām Ja'far named another son, Mūsā al-Kāzim. The Ismā'īlī(s) affirm that Ismā'īl did not die, but since his life was endangered, he had to escape with his disciples. Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes: "The question of the Successor to the sixth

Imām (Ja‘far al-Sādiq) having been made particularly difficult by the fact that the ‘Abbāsīd Caliph al-Mansūr had decided to put to death whoever was to be chosen officially by the sixth Imām as his Successor thereby hoping to put an end to the Shī‘ite movement.” (Nasr, 164-165). Some historians related that Ismā‘īl had died during his father’s lifetime, but the followers of Ismā‘īl refused to believe in the rumours of his death. The famous historian of religions Shahrastānī (d. 548/1153) reported the Ismā‘īlī viewpoint that “he did not die, but that his father had declared that he had died to save him from the ‘Abbāsīd Caliphs; and that he had held a funeral assembly to which Mansūr’s governor in Madīna was made a witness.” (Shahrastānī, 1984, 144)

The Ismā‘īlī(s), however, believed that the *Imāma* continued in the line of Ismā‘īl’s descendants. The Ismā‘īlī(s) spread their teaching during the IXth century from North Africa to Sind, in India, and they succeeded in establishing a prosperous Ismā‘īlī Fātimīd dynasty in Egypt. Ismā‘īlī(s) are subdivided into two groups: the Nizārī (headed by the living Imām the Āgā Khān), and the Musta‘lī community which subdivided into the Hāfiziyya and the Tayyibiyya. After the fall of the Fātimīd dynasty in 567/1171, the Hāfiziyya did not last very long. As for the Tayyibiyya, their last seen Imām was al-Tayyib who entered into a period of occultation soon after the death of the Imām al-Āmir (d. 524/1130). The Ismā‘īlīs are to be found mainly in East Africa, Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Syria, Iran, Yaman, Europe, and America.

After a brief period of prosperity under the Shī‘ī Būyid, Persian princes (Xth century), who were at that time the real masters of the ‘Abbāsīd Empire, Twelver Shī‘ī history has been marked by centuries of persecution. Only with the advent of the Safavid dynasty in the XVIth century and the reconstitution of the Iranian national sovereignty did Twelver Shī‘ites become free to express their faith openly. Almost all contemporary Iranians profess Shī‘ism. There are also considerable groups of Shī‘ites in ‘Iraq (where are found Shī‘ī holy places in: Najaf, Karbalā’, Kāzimayn), Lebanon, Syria, India, Pakistan, and other countries.

Historical Periods of Twelver Shī‘ism

We can distinguish four broad periods in the history of Twelver Shī‘ism. The first period was the period of holy Imāms and their followers. It extended until the date which

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marked the beginning of the “Great Occultation” (*al-Ghayba al-Kubrā*) of the Twelfth Imām (329/940). This date corresponded to the death of one of the earliest great Shī‘ī theologians, Muhammad ibn Ya‘qūb al-Kulaynī, who brought together a corpus of tens of thousands of *hadīth*(s), the sayings of Imāms, constituting the Shī‘ī *sunna* and the source of all Shī‘ī thought.

The second period extended from that date until the death of the great philosopher and Shī‘ī theologian, mathematician and astronomer, Nasīr al-dīn Tūsī (d. 676/1274), who, during the sack of Baghdad by the Mongols (1258), succeeded in saving the area and the Shī‘ī population. During this period, some theologians continued the work of al-Kulaynī; Shī‘ī traditions were collected in large compilations (by Ibn Babawayh, Shaykh al-Mufīd, Abū Ja‘far Tūsī, etc.). On the other hand, with Nasīr al-dīn Tūsī and his students (including ‘Allāma al-Hillī), Twelver Shī‘ī thought developed into a systematic form.

The third period extended from 1274 until the Safavid Renaissance in Iran, in the early XVIth century, which saw the birth of the School of Isfahān with the great figure of Mīr Dāmād (d. 1040/1631) and his numerous students. This period was extremely fruitful and contributed to this renaissance, which cannot be explained without the work that preceded it. The junction between Shī‘ī thought and the Sufī current inspired by the great Ibn ‘Arabī, occurred at this time. Here are some important thinkers with their impressive mystical works: Shāh Ni‘mat Allāh Walī, Haydar Āmulī, Ibn Abī Jumhūr, Sā‘in al-dīn Turkih Isfahānī, Rajāb Bursī, Shams al-dīn Lāhijī (the commentator of the famous mystic of Ādharbāyjan, Mahmūd Shabistārī).

The fourth period, stretching from the Safavid Renaissance until today, is characterized by a magnificent growth in philosophy and in spirituality (in the XVIIth century: Mīr Dāmād, Sadrā Shīrāzī, Muhsin Fayd, Qādī Sa‘īd Qummī; in the XIXth century: the two Zunūzī, Ja‘far Kashfī, Shaykh Ahmad Ahsā’ī and his school, Hādī Sabzivārī).

The Central Role of the Imām in Shī‘ism

The Prophet’s obligation is to reveal the religious law, the exoteric revelation that God “sent down” (*tanzīl*) to him through the Angel. The Imām is responsible for

“bringing back” (*ta’wīl*) this literal revelation to its origin (*asl*), its idea or archetype. The Prophet brings the outer aspect (*zāhir*) of revelation while the Imām unveils its inner meaning (*bātin*). ‘Alī is reported to have said that not a word of the Qur’ān was revealed to the Prophet without Muhammad personally instructing him about the text and all of its hidden meanings.

According to early Shī‘ī sources, only the first Imām ‘Alī and his direct descendants received the Qur’ān in all its integrity; the version of the Caliph ‘Uthmān was therefore incomplete. Based on the oldest pre-Būyid sources, we can see that for at least a respectable number of Shī‘ites, the Qur’ānic vulgate compiled by ‘Uthmān was considered a censored and falsified version of the original Qur’ān. The compilation of ‘Alī, by far larger than the compilation of ‘Uthmān, remained in possession of the Imāms and will only be universally revealed by the *Qā’im* (Riser) at the End of Time. (See the articles of Eliash, Kohlberg, Lawson, Bar-Asher, Modarressi.) The primary Shī‘ī sources contain some excerpts pertaining to this “original Qur’ān,” with some notable differences with the official version (i.e. missing excerpts often involving words, phrases or sentences). (See the articles of St. Clair Tisdall and Bar-Asher.) However, most of these “censored expressions” refers to ‘Alī, the Imāms and their *Walāya*.

The *Walāya*, as a sacred mission of Imāms, is identical to *Imāma* (the office of temporal and spiritual Guides). In this sense, it is a spiritual power granted to Imāms by Divine election. Without Imām, the text of revelation does not unveil its real meaning, as a letter whose spirit would have remained unknown. For this reason the Qur’ān is called the Silent Book or the Silent Guide (*Imām sāmit*), while the Imām is said to be the Speaking Qur’ān (*Qur’ān Nātiq*). The *Walāya* of ‘Alī is mentioned in the previous revelations as well as in the Qur’ān, every Messenger was commissioned to proclaim the Prophecy of Muhammad and the *Walāya* of ‘Alī. The *Walāya* is therefore the kernel of all revelations. The *Walāya* is the gist of *Nubuwwa* (Prophecy), as the *bātin* is the justification for the existence of the *zāhir*. Many Shī‘ī traditions explained that religion reaches its perfection through the *Walāya*.

Several meanings are found in the root WLY such as: the *Walī* is the “Friend” and “Helper” the closest to God and His Prophet and he “follows” the Prophet immediately as “the Master (*Mawlā*)” par excellence of believers. In this sense, the *Walī* means also

Wasī, the Heir (of the sacred cause of Prophets). Applied to followers of the Imāms, the *Walāya* means also love, faith, loyalty and devotion of believers toward the *Walī*. Shī‘ism is the religion of love for the Perfect Master.

For Shī‘ites, *Walāya* is the supreme pillar of Islam the core of the religion. Without the *Walāya* there is no real faith. Without the spirit, the literal meaning of the revelation is dead like an empty nutshell or a lifeless body. When the canonical rituals such as prayer, fasting, or the pilgrimage to Makka are not mentioned in Shī‘ī sources, this does not mean they are not part of the pillars of Islam but that they are integrated into the *Walāya* which is “the key” of all pillars. The Shī‘ī profession of faith (*shahāda*) includes a triple affirmation recognizing: the oneness of God, the Prophecy (*Nubuwwa*) of Muhammad, and the *Walāya* of ‘Alī and his progeny. Without the presence of Imām, the *Walī* of God and his *Walāya*, there is no religion. Without *Walāya* religion has no meaning.

The Shī‘ī understanding of the Imām as *Walī Allāh* (“Friend of God”) invests the Imām with a cosmic and sacred function, and makes him the Perfect Man, the mystical Pole (*Qutb*) of the world. The struggle of the Prophets and Imāms against evil occurs at every period of history. The companions of Muhammad, who rejected the *Walāya* of ‘Alī, were those who refused the esoteric religion and became lost because they follow only the superficial meaning of revelation.

Imām and Prophet are united like the inseparable two sides of a coin. They are one light manifested in two persons. Muhammad said to ‘Alī “You are from me and I am from you (*anta minnī wa anā minka*).” The Light of the *Walāya* (*Nūr al-Walāya*) designates the unique and double Light of Muhammad and ‘Alī (Read the articles of Rubin). Thousands of years before the creation of the physical world, God from His own Light emanated luminous impeccable beings (Muhammad, Fātima, and the Imāms) and initiated them to His Divine Science. When the physical world was created, the Light of the *Walāya* became manifested in Adam. From him, the Light of *Nubuwwa* (Prophecy) is perpetuated in the lineage of the Prophets and the Light of *Walāya* is manifested in the lineage of the Imāms. Thereafter began the long journey of the Light through the long chain of Perfect Guides until Muhammad and ‘Alī. The Light intensity reached its highest peak through its manifestation in Muhammad, Fātima, ‘Alī, and the Imāms.

The Theophany of the Fourteen Impeccable Beings in Twelver Shī'ism

Shī'ism professes that God is unknowable, inscrutable, and ineffable; God is the abyss of silence that no word may qualify. This unknowable God becomes knowable by spiritual figures who are His theophanies. The metaphysical Muhammadian Reality (*Haqīqa Muhammadiyya*) is the primordial theophany equivalent to the *Logos* in Neoplatonism and Christianity. The *Haqīqa Muhammadiyya* has an intelligible dual-dimension: its exoteric side represented by the Prophet and its esoteric side corresponding to the Imām and the *Walāya* (Institution of the Friends of God). The Muhammadian *Logos* therefore includes fourteen entities or eons of Light: at their metaphysical level, they are persons of Light (*shakhs-i nūranī*), consisting of the Prophet, his daughter Fātima, and the twelve Imāms. They are designated as the world of “Fourteen Impeccable Beings” (those that no fault or sin can ever reach). The Prophet therefore represents the *zāhir* (exoteric); the world of the twelve Imāms is the *bātin* (esoteric); Fātima is the confluence of these two Lights. Prophet and Imām are in essence one and the same light.

These figures polarize Shī'ī speculation and devotion. Much more important than their fleeting appearance in earthly history, it is through their reality of light that these figures may be contemplated. In Twelver Shī'ī theology, the number twelve has a supernatural significance. Limiting the number of Imāms to twelve results both from the virtues of the number twelve (verified in the structures of being, in the zodiac, the Temple of the Ka'ba, etc.). One can even say that this limitation leads necessarily to the occultation of the Twelfth Imām (see the list of twelve Imāms at the end of the chapter).

The Cycles of History and the Sacred Reappearance of the Twelfth Imām

The two dimensions (exoteric and esoteric) of the *Nūr Muhammadī* (Muhammadian Light) correspond to the two movements: one descending (*nuzūl*) and another ascending (*su'ūd*). The descent of this Light, in this world, is essentially the exoteric mission of Prophets leading to the terminal mission of Muhammad, the “Seal of the Prophets.” The ascending movement is essentially done by the Imāms who unveil through the *ta'wīl* (spiritual exegesis) the inner meanings of revelation. The *Haqīqa Muhammadiyya* (Muhammadian Reality) is ultimately the key to metaphysical history, ensuring its

orientation to the religious conscience of humanity based on the revealed Holy Books. That is why a long Shī'ī *hadīth* explains that during this descent, the Light stayed in “twelve veils of light” and it will ascend back to its origin through the same veils. These veils are the esoteric Imāms corresponding to twelve millennia.

By the same token, we can see the importance of the figure who crowns the metaphysical history, namely the Twelfth Imām. The two movements of descent and ascent of Muhammadian Light constitute the “cycle of Prophecy” and the “cycle of *Walāya*”. There were six major Prophets (Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad), each one was succeeded by twelve Imāms, the Twelfth Imām serving as a transition before the next Prophetic period. The Twelfth Imām of the Muhammadian period, “Prophet of the Seventh Day” will not bring at his *Parousia*, a new *sharī'a*, but the unveiling (the *ta'wīl*) of all inner meanings of previous revelations. Therefore he will be the Lord of the Resurrection (*Qā'im al-Qiyāma*).

Ultimately, the major difference between the Sunnī understanding of Islam and the Shī'ī perspective is perhaps this: Sunnī Islam considers the cycle of Prophecy as closed— the “Seal of Prophets” came, there is nothing else to expect— however, everyone agrees that mankind still need a Guide to update the Qur'ān. This is the vain situation into which early Shī'ism refuses to sink. It also admits that the cycle of legislative Prophecy is permanently closed. But with the departure of the last Prophet, something new has begun: the cycle of *Walāya* which guarantees that humanity has something to expect. The guarantor of this period of waiting is the Twelfth Imām, who briefly appeared as a child (at the age of five) the same day his father died; immediately afterwards, he entered into a first “occultation” (874) in which he was still visible to some dignitaries. Sixty-six years later (940), he entered into the “Great Occultation” (*al-Ghayba al-Kubrā*). The Imām of our time (*Sāhib al-zamān*) remains invisible to the physical senses but he is present in the heart of his faithful.

Thus, the Twelfth Imām, Muhammad al-Mahdī, the son of Imām Hasan al-Askarī, is himself the history of Twelver Shī'ī consciousness for the past ten centuries. Belonging to this history is an incomparable philosophical renaissance unknown outside Shī'ī Islam.

From the Safavid Dynasty to the Pahlavī Dynasty

In addition to its theosophical aspect, Twelver Shī‘ism has an original history. The Iranian Islamic revolution has attracted worldwide attention. According to Shī‘ī ideology, during the occultation only the Twelfth Imām is considered to be the legitimate ruler of the community. Initially in Persia the majority of Muslims were Sunnī, Shī‘ism became the official religion of the Safavid dynasty only in the XVIth century. Shī‘ism has been enriched by Persian culture which was isolated between the Ottoman Empire and the Afghan-Indian world.

When in 1501 Shāh Ismā‘īl was conquering Persia, he declared Shī‘ism the official religion of the kingdom, but he noticed the absence of legal and theological Shī‘ī institutions. To govern, he needed ‘*ulamā*’ who would recognize the legitimacy of his power and could enforce the law of the Ja‘farite School (inspired from the teachings of Imām Ja‘far al-Sādiq). Some Shī‘ī ‘*ulamā*’ from Lebanon (Jabal ‘Āmil) and Bahrayn came to provide their help.

The theologians of this time felt compelled to justify their own authority in relation to the sovereign: the prevalent theory was that the *mujtahid*(s) were alone entitled to interpret the revelation and to enforce the law of Islam. This view was going against the Safavid claim to be the descendants of Imāms and therefore their best representatives on earth. A compromise was nevertheless found in the common interest; for example, Shāh Tahmasp 1st (1524-1576) went so far as to give the great *mujtahid* Nūr al-Dīn ‘Alī Karakī the title of lieutenant of the Hidden Imām. The Shāh himself did not govern but he delegated his powers; thus, important positions (such as *sadr* or chief *mullā* (*mullā bashī*)) with donations made the ‘*ulamā*’ financially independent and gave them a huge influence. Against this majority trend of Shī‘ism, called *usūlī* (because *mujtahid*(s) use their individual thought to apply religious principles (*usūl*) in society), another trend called *akhbārī* hold individual reasoning as an impious innovation, and advocate the exclusive reliance on traditions of Imāms (*akhbār* or *hadīth*). According to this last school, the ‘*ulamā*’ are relegated to the role of transmitting knowledge, and therefore have no particular authority.

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Persia underwent a revival under the Safavid dynasty (1502-1736) and the Afsharid dynasty (1736-1794) inaugurated by Nādir Shāh (d. 1154/1741) from a Turkmen tribe, the Afshar. Afterwards, Persia passed under the Qajar dynasty (1794-1924) making Tehran its capital. Eventually the Shāhs entered under the dominance of Imperialist political powers such as: Great Britain, Russia, and France. These powers were particularly interested in the important oil reserve of Persia (the third-largest in the world).

Later there appeared reformers who were inspired by a hatred of absolutism. The best known of these politico-religious thinkers, who had a huge influence throughout the Islamic world, is a Shī'ī Iranian theologian, Jamāl al-dīn Asadābādī (1838-1897). To be accepted by a Sunnī audience, he declared that he was from Afghanistan (al-Afghānī). After failing to convince the Shāh to make reforms, he sought to encourage rebellion against the British (boycott of the tobacco monopoly in 1891-1892), to mobilize all the Muslims against absolutism. Al-Afghānī inspired, from Istanbul, a movement that led to the assassination of the Qājar Nāsir al-dīn Shāh (1896).

The profound influence of al-Afghānī and other reformers, more or less marked by the “secularist” ideal imported from the West, was felt as a threat to traditional Shī'ī '*ulamā*'. There was a nationalist uprising against the Shāh that led to the establishment of a Constitution in 1906 and a parliament in 1907. The most important *mujtahid* Mīrzā Hasan Shīrāzī (in 'Iraq) played a decisive role in the preparation and success of the Constitutional Revolution 1906-1909. However, in 1911, with the help of the European powers, the Shāh restored his absolutist power. Unlike Sunnī '*ulamā*' who depended on the State, Shī'ī '*ulamā*' were financially independent, supported by the tax called *khums* (fifth of income) paid directly by the faithful.

With the help of the British, Rezā Shāh Pahlavī inaugurated the reign of the Pahlavī dynasty (1925-1979). In 1935, he changed the name of Persia to Iran and he was planning to free Iran from foreign domination. This policy displeased the British who forced Rezā Shāh to resign in 1941 in favour of his pro-British son, Muhammad Rezā Shāh Pahlavī, who remained in power until 1979. In 1951, the Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadegh, with the favour of the parliament, nationalized the British oil industry. In 1953, a military coup, organized by the British intelligence services, forced

Mossadegh to resign from office. Afterwards, the Shāh recovered all his power and reigned as a supreme Dictator in the interest of foreign dominions.

The Iranian Revolution until Today

At the time of the Shāh, Āyat Allāh Khumainī (1902-1989) led a resistance movement which was punished severely. He was imprisoned and then exiled to 'Iraq. Khumainī had two goals: to overthrow the Pahlavī monarchy and to eliminate American influence. At the request of the 'Iraqī government, he left the country to settle in Paris, where he led a resistance movement until the fall of the monarchy. Iranian students, who suffered from poverty and had strong anti-western feelings in the 1970s, contributed to the success of the revolution. They participated in the attack on the US Embassy in Tehran and took some American hostages. In March 1979, the political system of Iran changed from a hereditary monarchy to an Islamic Republic. The Islamic Republic of Iran was proclaimed; Khumainī triumphantly returned to Tehran and took power. In early February 1980, Āyat Allāh Khumainī was welcomed by the people, who believed he incarnated the long-awaited Mahdī. He led his country in accordance with his political ideology. According to Khumainī, the duty of the people is to apply the Divine laws and obey them. In the absence of the Imām, the '*ulamā*' are the guardians (*walī(s)*), interpreters, and executors of the Divine law. The government must follow the example of the Prophet, the Imāms, and the '*ulamā*'. Since the rule of Islam is the rule of law, only '*ulamā*', and nobody else, should be in charge of the government. They are the only ones capable of realizing on earth what the Prophet wanted. All that has been entrusted to the Prophet was given to the Imāms, and afterwards, to the '*ulamā*'.

For the first time in Shī'ism, a theologian claimed the integrity of the legitimate authority for '*ulamā*' recognized as heirs and transmitters of the tradition of the Twelfth Imām until his return at the end of time. This theory of the *wilāyat-i faqīh* (governance by the jurisprudent) was included explicitly in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 (principle 5), despite some inconsistencies with democratic principles. Khumaynī was explicitly proclaimed *faqīh* (doctor of law). His theory of the Muslim State is based on the *wilāyat-i faqīh* which was criticized extensively by the outstanding scholar Tabātabā'ī Qumī (d. 1986), who lived in 'Iraq. According to him, the true Shī'ī

theory was that since the disappearance of the Twelfth Imām, the Muslim world was without a legitimate guide until his return. Therefore there is no just and legitimate leader, nor just and legitimate government. According to Tabātabā'ī, the theory of Khumainī goes against the foundation of Shī'ism.

In the meantime, the 'Iraqī leader Saddam Husayn, who wanted to take advantage of the weakness of Iran's military power, initiated the Iran-'Iraq war (1980-1988). His intention was to expand his power in the Middle East and get access to the Persian Gulf by acquiring the Khūzistān region, which was especially rich in oil. Saddam's war was financially backed by foreign dominions. Āyat Allāh Khumainī died in 1989 and was succeeded by Āyat Allāh 'Alī Khomeinī, who was elected by a body of senior clerics. Although the Iranian political system is a theocracy, it has also a parliament with an elected President. In 2005, Mahmud Ahmadinejad was elected President. On June 12th, 2009 presidential election were held reappointing him but many Iranians contested and disputed the legitimacy of the election results and were repressed by the Iranian government.

Ismā'ilism

Ultimately, the major difference between the Twelver Shī'ī understanding of Islam and the Nizārī Ismā'ilī Shī'ī perspective is perhaps this: the Nizārī Ismā'ilī(s) reject the concept of Great Occultation (*al-Ghayba al-Kubrā*) because the Imām must always be accessible on earth to provide his guidance. Though the number twelve is important in Ismā'ilism, it is not as central as it is for Twelver Shī'ism simply because the Ismā'ilīs believe in more than twelve Imāms. The Musta'li-Ismā'ilīs shared with the Twelver Shī'ites the notion of occultation because their last Imām al-Tayyib went into occultation in 526/1131. The Ismā'ilīs are often wrongly called the Seveners (*Sab'iyya*). This appellation creates a great confusion; as Wladimir Ivanow explains, this name refers to the Qarmatians who believe only in seven Imāms and are effectively separated from the Ismā'ilī branch of Islam (Ivanow, 1974, 179). One of the main obstacles that prevents a proper understanding of the Ismā'ilī movement is the paucity of historical material and also the fact that only Sunnī sources relating Ismā'ilī history survived. We can divide Ismā'ilī history into six important phases.

Six Phases of Ismā‘īlī History

Early Shī‘ī Islam

The first period extends from Imām ‘Alī to Imām Ja‘far al-Sādiq. The Ismā‘īlīs share these Imāms with the Twelvers. The concept of *Imāma* was established and formulated by the Ja‘farite School. As Corbin said:

Up to the time of the sixth Imām, Ja‘far al-Sādiq (d. 148/765), Twelver and Ismā‘īlī Shī‘ites both venerated the same Imāmic line. Now, apart from the teachings of the first Imām that have come down to us, the great themes of Shī‘ite gnosis have mainly been constructed around the teachings of the fourth, fifth and sixth Imāms, ‘Alī Zayn al-‘Ābidīn (d. 95/714), Muhammad al-Bāqir (d. 115/733), and Ja‘far al-Sādiq (d. 148/765). Any study of the origins of Shī‘ism cannot therefore dissociate one branch from the other. (Corbin, 1993, 31)

We have access to some literature which was compiled after Ja‘far al-Sādiq’s lifetime. Among the most important works are: the *Nahj al-balāgha* (sayings attributed to ‘Alī), the *Al-Sahīfa al-kāmila al-sajjādiyya* of Imām Zayn al-‘Ābidīn and the *Tafsīr* of Imām Ja‘far al-Sādiq. Before his death, Imām Ja‘far al-Sādiq appointed Ismā‘īl as his Successor. The Ismā‘īlīs affirm that Ismā‘īl’s life was endangered however he managed to escape with his disciples.

The Pre-Fātimid Period

The second period runs from Imām Ismā‘īl (*circa* 147/764 or later) to Imām Radī al-dīn ‘Abd Allāh (d. *circa* 268/882) and is called the pre-Fātimid period. It was a period of *satr* (concealment); the Imāms were *mastūr* (hidden from the public for a certain period of time). The concept of *mastūr* must not be confused with the Twelver idea of *ghayba* which means that the Mahdī is occulted until the Day of Resurrection. In this complex situation, Jābir ibn Hayyān wrote many treatises on alchemy and on the mystical science of letters. The Encyclopaedia of Ikhwān al-safā’ (Brethren of Purity) was composed by authors who had a vast knowledge of Hellenic literature and of the various sciences existing during that time.

The Fātimid Period

The Fātimid period started with the Caliph ‘Ubayd Allāh (d. 322/934) and ended with the Caliph al-‘Ādid (d. 567/1171). An Ismā‘īlī State was established in Ifriqiyya (Tunisia) and later in northern Africa. The University of al-Azhar was founded around 360/970. The Ismā‘īlī theosophy was gradually structured by Al-Nasafī (d. 331/942), Abū Hātim al-Rāzī (d. 322/933-4), Abū Ya‘qub al-Sijistānī (IV/Xth century), Qādī al-Nu‘mān (d. 363/974), etc. Later Ismā‘īlism received an official form through the labours of Hamīd al-dīn Kirmānī (d. 412/1021) and Nāsir-i Khusraw (d. after 465/1072). At the death of Imām al-Mustansir bi-Allāh, a split occurred between the western Ismā‘īlīs (followers of Musta‘lī) and the eastern Ismā‘īlīs (followers of Nizār). The legitimate heir to *Imāma*, Nizār, was dethroned in favour of al-Musta‘lī. The Mus‘taliyya continued to rule the Fātimid State until the death of the Caliph al-Āmir (d. 524/1130). Then the center of the *da‘wa* was transferred to Yaman and at the end of the XVIth century the headquarters were moved to India. The lineage of al-Musta‘lī was extinguished with his grandson al-Tayyib b. al-Āmir who disappeared in 526/1131 and became the awaited Imām. After the death of al-Āmir, his cousin al-Hāfiz took over the control of the Fātimid State and was proclaimed Caliph. The followers of the lineage of al-Hāfiz are called Hāfiziyya. The last Fātimid Caliph, al-‘Ādid (d. 567/1171) was probably assassinated by Salāh al-dīn (popularly known as Saladin), the founder of the Ayyūbid dynasty.

The Alamūt Period

The Alamūt period extended from Imām Nizār to Imām Rukn al-dīn Khurshāh. The Nizārī Ismā‘īlī State was established in Alamūt by Hasan-i Sabbāh. In 559/1164 Imām Hasan ‘Alā Dhikri-hi al-Salām unveiled the inner meaning of the *sharī‘a* (religious law) by proclaiming the *Qiyāmat al-Qiyāma* (Great Resurrection). According to Henry Corbin:

What the proclamation implied was nothing less than the coming of a pure spiritual Islam, freed from all spirit of legalism and of all enslavement to the law, a personal religion of the Resurrection which is spiritual birth, in that it makes

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possible the discovery and the living realisation of the spiritual meaning of the prophetic revelations. (Corbin, 1993, 95)

Later Imām Jalāl al-dīn Hasan returned to a period of concealment of the truth behind the outward aspect (*zāhir*) of the religious law (*sharī'a*). Alamūt was destroyed by the Mongol Hülegü in 654/1256, but Ismā'īlism survived in Persia under the cover of Sufism.

The Ginānic Period

The Ginānic period began with Imām Shams al-dīn Muhammad and ended with Imām Khalīl Allāh III. The Ismā'īlī *da'wa* in India had previously begun during the early Fātimid period. Ibn Hawshab (Mansūr al-Yaman d. 302/914) sent his nephew Haytham as a missionary to Sind. The *da'wa* (missionary organisation) was partly destroyed by Mahmūd of Ghazna in 401/1010. It reappeared later in the VIIIth/XIVth century, during a period of concealment (*dawr al-satr*), and developed in India where the Ismā'īlī faith was propagated. During that time, the *Imāma* was perpetuated under the mantle of Sufism in Persia. The Pīrs started to preach in northern India, more particularly in Punjab, Sind, and Kashmir; eventually the process of conversion reached the south. The Imām Qāsim Shāh sent Pīr Shams to India where he made Multān his headquarters. His disciples were known as Shamsis. Pīr Sadr al-dīn became famous, because he was considered the founder of the Khōjā community. He was succeeded by Hasan Kabīr al-dīn. One of the grandsons of Pīr Hasan Kabīr al-dīn, Nar Muhammad Shāh, composed gināns in which he declared that his father was Imām and that he was himself a Successor to *Imāma*. The Imām-shāhī sect originated in this time of turmoil.

The Modern or Āghā Khān Period

The current period is the Āghā Khān period. The Imāms were living in the Indian subcontinent, but they have now relocated to Europe. The present living Imām of Nizārī Ismā'īlīs, Prince Karīm Āghā Khān IV, lives in France.

Multiple Influences

The complexity of Ismā'īlism relies on its multiple facets. We will look at three major facets of Ismā'īlism: 1) Neo-Platonism during the Fātimid period, 2) the Sufī influence in

Persia, and 3) Vaishnavism (tradition belonging to Hinduism) in the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent.

Neo-Platonism in Ismāʿīlism during the Fātimid Period

Ismāʿīlism developed a complex and rich theosophy which owed a great deal to pre-Islamic Neo-Platonism. The process of translating philosophical and scientific works started seriously during the ʿAbbāsīd period, especially during the reign of the Caliph al-Maʾmūn (d. 218/833). This Caliph supported the cause of the Muʿtazilites who were trying to apply Greek thought to Muslim dogmas. Al-Maʾmūn created the *Bayt al-Hikma* (the House of Wisdom) which included an Institute and a library for translation and research.

In the IIIth/IXth century, the translations from Greek to Arabic proliferated, at first by the intermediary of Syriac, then directly. The teams of translators consisted of Christians, Jews, and later Muslims. Plotinus was not known under his real name, although the impact of his thought on the Muslim world was greater than the impact of Aristotle. Muslims did not know any of his work; the *Enneads* were rife with changes and paraphrases and were known incorrectly as the *Theologia of Aristotle*. (Netton, 9: “..the notorious *Theology of Aristotle* (*Theologia Aristotelis*), and *The Book of Pure Good*, known in Latin as the *Liber de Causis* and in Arabic as the *Kitāb al-Īdāh fī al-Khayr al-Mahd*. Both may be described as, at least, indirect products of the Alexandrine philosophical milieu. The first has nothing to do with Aristotle but summarises, with some external padding, Plotinus’ *Enneads*, Books IV-VI; the second, also attributed to Aristotle, is based upon Proclus’ *Element of Theology*.”) The *Theologia of Aristotle* had the most important impact on the philosophical tradition of Islam, where the Neo-Platonist scheme is found, i.e. from the One emanates the Intellect and the Soul. The *Theologia of Aristotle* also played a significant role in the development of Ismāʿīlism. (See the cosmology developed by Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Nasafī, Abū Hātim al-Rāzī, and later by Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī.)

The most important Ismāʿīlī compendium of scientific works is the *Rasāʾil al-Ikhwān al-safāʾ*, where Greek philosophical influences are clearly manifested. The authors, known as the Ikhwān al-safāʾ (Brethren of Purity), relied greatly upon hermetic

symbols for the development of their own theosophy. The *Rasā'il* was also influenced by Neo-Pythagorean arithmetical theories; the authors based themselves on the Pythagorean principle: "The beings are according to the nature of the number." (*Rasā'il al-Ikhwān al-safā'*, vol. 3, 200) They were inspired by an assertion attributed to Pythagoras: "In the knowledge of the properties of numbers and in the way they are classified and ranked in grades resides the knowledge of the beings of God." (*Rasā'il al-Ikhwān al-safā'*, vol. 3, 200) The Ikhwān al-safā' realised that each number depends on the preceding number and can be decomposed, unit by unit, till one arrives at the first, the source of all numbers. But from the One "we cannot withdraw anything... because it is the origin and the source of number." (*Rasā'il al-Ikhwān al-safā'*, vol. 3, 236) According to the Ikhwān al-safā', beings are like numbers: they come from God and return finally to Him.

Let us examine the Neo-Platonist influence on the conception of God of Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī, a Fātimid *dā'ī*. The God of Plotinus is described as the One or the Good. Plotinus adopted an expression taken from Plato: "The Good beyond being." (*Republic*, VI, 5091 B) The One therefore for Plotinus has no definition. We find in the Arabic Plotinian source this saying: "Whoever wishes to describe the Almighty Creator must remove from Him all attributes..." (*Fī al-'ilm al-ilāhī (Epistolia de Scientia Divina)*, 183) Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī developed a conception of God which, according to him, avoided two common mistakes: *tashbīh* (anthropomorphism) and *ta'tīl* (agnosticism, i.e. placing God so high that He becomes inaccessible). Al-Sijistānī argued that we can only know God through the Intellect (*al-'Aql*). (Sijistānī, *Al-Maqālīd*, 19-23) Plotinus argued that all attributes must be removed from God. God is therefore outside being (*aysiya*) and not-being (*laysiya*). But al-Sijistānī developed his own original method of recognising the Unity of God (*Tawhīd*). This method proposes a double negation. Thus, for example, God is both not-being and not not-being. By according primacy to this double negation, nothing could be said about God that is merely either positive or negative. (Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Ifṭikhār*, f. 9b)

Sufi Aspects of the Nizārī Tradition in Persia

One of the most important debates in western thought is the perpetual conflict between the Platonic world and the peripatetic world. We can note that in Ismā'īlism this problem

is solved by the Imām, who belongs to both the physical and the spiritual world. The basic question that is encountered in Ismāʿīlī treatises is the problem of the reconciliation of intellect (*ʿaql*) and revelation (*tanzīl*). Nāsir-i Khusraw, in his work entitled *Jāmiʿ al-Hikmatayn*, tried to reconcile the two: the Greek philosophy which is based on *burhān* (demonstration) and the Ismāʿīlī theology which is based on the revelation and on the *taʿwīl* (spiritual exegesis) of the Imām.

The famous Muslim historian of religions al-Shahrastānī (d. 548/1153) in his *Milal wa al-nihal* described Fātimid Ismāʿīlism as *daʿwa qadīma*, “the ancient *daʿwa*”, opposing it to the Ismāʿīlism of Alamūt as *daʿwa jadīda*, “the modern *daʿwa*” or “the reformed *daʿwa*”. (Al-Shahrastānī, 427) The proclamation of the “Great Resurrection” (*Qiyāma al-Qiyāma*) at Alamūt revealed the essence (*bātin*) of Ismāʿīlism while in the Fātimid period the essence remained veiled. We can oppose these two periods by asking ourselves: were not the Fātimids trying to sacrifice the *bātin* (inward) whereas Alamūt was sacrificing the *zāhir* (outward)? Perhaps the brilliant outward power of the Fātimids was in fact incompatible with the true inward nature of Ismāʿīlī faith. Only in Alamūt, and even later when it survived under the mantle of Sufism, could Ismāʿīlism reveal its true greatness.

The reforms of Alamūt were initiated by two individuals: Hasan-i Sabbāh (d. 518/1124), the founder of the Alamūt State, and the Imām Hasan ʿAlā dhikri-hi al-Salām, who proclaimed the *Qiyāma* in 559/1164. During the *Qiyāmat al-Qiyāma*, the Imām was integrally manifested, *zāhir* and *bātin* were in concomitance, and all the believers understood the inner meaning (*bātin*) of the outward aspect (*zāhir*) of life. The inner meaning of religion was emphasised over the external aspects of earthly life bound by religious law (*sharīʿa*).

When Ismāʿīlism later survived under the mantle of Sufism, its essence did not change, because Ismāʿīlism is essentially an esoteric and a mystical faith. Wladimir Ivanow noted that Persian Ismāʿīlism took a strong Sufi colouring. He attributed this solely to the need for *taqiyya* (dissimulation of the faith [in order to protect oneself]), because the Ismāʿīlīs lived in a climate of persecution, and it suited their need for security to appear as a Sufi order. According to Ivanow, all Persian mysticism springs from Ismāʿīlism. (Ivanow, 1938, 49)

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Ismā'īlism and Sufism share common parentage since they are both on the esoteric path of Islam. They have influenced each other in innumerable ways. "There is ample historical evidence that certain Ismā'īlī Imāms, from the Safavid period up until the third Āghā Khān in the present century, were intimately connected with" Sufi orders. (N. Pourjavady and P. L. Wilson, 114)

Vaishnavism in the Nizārī Tradition of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent

The Ginānic literature developed mainly from the XIVth century to the XIXth century. It is an excellent example of the synthesis between Hinduism and Ismā'īlism. Before their conversion, the Ismā'īlīs were Hindus believing in cycles of reincarnations. They wanted to escape the *samsaric* wheel of birth and rebirth. They believed in ten *avatāras* of Vishnu. They admitted that nine *avatāras* had already come on earth and they were expecting the coming of the last *avatāra*.

The main goal of the *da'wa* (missionary organisation) was to reformulate the Ismā'īlī theosophy of Alamūt in Hindu terminology. The first Pīrs, who were Iranians, transmitted the teaching (*ta'līm*) of the Imām to the disciples. They wanted to transmit the essence (*bātin*) of the faith. Following Hindu customs, the Pīrs composed religious songs (*bhajans*, *garbīs*, and *gināns*) to propagate Nizārī Ismā'īlism without imposing a foreign structure of thought. The process of conversion was gradual and adapted to the Hindu mind.

Hindu symbols were used to facilitate conversions: the Qur'ān was considered the last sacred Book, the Atharva-Veda. Islam was described as the religion of the final period, Kali-yuga, announced by Hindu prophecies. Prophet Muhammad was represented as Brahmā. The Imām 'Alī became the Xth *avatāra* of Vishnu. The term *avatāra* can be defined as "a down-coming, a descent, an Epiphany of the Divine in human form." The notion of *avatāra* is similar to the concept of *mazhar-i Allāh* (the place where the Light of God is manifested on earth) attributed to the Imām. The *avatāra* comprises many Imāms living during a cycle. The last *avatāra* extended from Imām Seth till the last Imām of the cycle. Usually the *avatāra* is known by the most well-known Imām: 'Alī represents the last *avatāra*, Naklankī.

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The word “*ginān*” is derived from a Sanskrit word “*jñāna*” defined as “contemplative or meditative knowledge” (Nanji, 7) which is similar to the Islamic notion of *Ma‘rifa* (gnosis, saving knowledge, enlightenment). In the *gināns*, the Pīrs revealed the *tafsīr* (exegesis) of the Qur’ān. The *gināns* adopted the essential basic principles of Islam. By converting Hindus to Islam, the Pīrs explained that the recognition of the Prophet Muhammad and his descendants lead to the right path *satpanth* equivalent to the Islamic concept of *al-sirāt al-mustaqīm*. The *gināns* became therefore the guide of human conduct and encompassed every facet of human life. They prescribed the means by which mystical unity with God could be realised on earth.

In the IXth/XVth century, Pīr Imām Shāh composed the longest version of the *Dasa avatāra*, in which the theme of creation was developed. In the beginning, there was Nārāyana. After a period of inactivity, from the Light of Nārāyana was created the *Panj tan-i Pāk* composed of the Light of Nārāyana (‘Alī), Brahmā (Muhammad), Fātima, Hasan, and Husayn. After the manifestation of the *Panj tan-i Pāk*, there was another period of inactivity, and then from the Light of Brahmā, the entire Universe appeared. These five Islamic figures, who are fundamental in Shī‘ism, were thus explained and incorporated by the Pīrs in their teachings.

According to this mythology, in the beginning of the first *yuga* (*krita*) or cycle of creation, Brahmā gave birth to a son named Samkho who stole the four Vedas. Brahmā sought the help of Nārāyana to retrieve the Vedas. Nārāyana appeared in his first shape as *Machh avatāra* in order to fight Samkho. Samkho asked Nārāyana to permit him to manifest himself during the period of the nine other *avatāras* to oppose him. This request was accepted in order to bring back the Vedas to Brahmā. Nārāyana thus manifested himself during four *yugas* (*krita*, *treta*, *dvapara*, *kali*). At the end of time, it is said that Nārāyana will fight Samkho and defeat him. This mythical story is very similar to that formulated by a Yamanite Ismā‘īlī, Idrīs ‘Imād al-dīn (d. 872/1468), in his treatise *Zahr al-ma‘ānī*, which refers to “the implacable adversaries who appear from cycle to cycle until the form of Iblīs (the devil) is extinguished.” (Corbin, 1983, 41)

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It would be wrong to reduce contemporary Shī'ism to a mosaic of politico-religious ideologies, even if the Iranian Revolution has focused on this aspect. Shī'ism is a different way to live Islam; it is characterized by the love for the Imāms, direct descendants of 'Alī. Twelver Shī'ism has a passionate sensitivity (the worship of martyr Imāms), a keen taste for pilgrimage (including the mausoleum of Imām 'Alī al-Ridā, in Mashhad and that of his sister Fātima Ma'suma in Qum), and an ardent tradition with a wholehearted interest in mysticism. It also emphasizes the values of justice and heroism, whose example was given by Imām Husayn, who died in battle at Karbalā' in 680. The Twelver Shī'ites believe that the return of the Twelfth Imām (in *ghayba* since 874) will usher in a reign of justice. They celebrate his birth, fifteen days before Ramadān, in a jubilant manifestation of popular joy.

Even though Ismā'īlī theosophy is multi-faceted, there are basic elements of the faith that reappear in every period of its history. The essence (*bātin*) of Ismā'īlism remains unchanged but the external aspect (*zāhir*) changes. The Nizārī Ismā'īlīs believe that the first man (*Adam Kadmon*) who existed on earth was an Imām and the last will also be an Imām, the Imām of the Resurrection. As Imām 'Alī is reported to have stated in the Sermon of the Great Declaration (*Khutbat al-bayān*): "I am the First and the Last." All the Imāms bears the same Light (*Nūr*) of 'Alī which is consubstantial to the Light (*Nūr*) of Muhammad that pervades the whole of creation. All Imāms are thus understood to be of one and the same essence, transmitting the *Sophia Perennis* (Eternal Wisdom) to the seekers of enlightenment from generation to generation until the end of time.

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