The Institute of Ismaili Studies

# "Diversity in Islam: Communities of Interpretation"

*The Muslim Almanac*

Farhad Daftary

The death of the Prophet Muhammad after a brief illness confronted the nascent Muslim community (*umma*) with its first major crisis, the crisis of succession to the Prophet. As a result, the hitherto unified Muslim community was soon split into its two major divisions or distinct communities of interpretation, designated subsequently as Sunnism and Shi‘ism. In time, the Sunni and Shi‘a themselves were subdivided into a number of smaller communities and groupings with particular theological and legal doctrines that evolved gradually over several centuries. In addition to the Sunnis and the Shi‘as, other communities of interpretation in the form of religio-political movements or schools of thought began to appear among the early Muslims during this formative period. Most of these early communities proved short-lived, although several of them left lasting influences on the teachings of the surviving communities and shaped important aspects of Muslim thought. The Kharijis (or Khawarij), a religio-political community of the first Islamic century who were opposed to both the Shi‘as and the Sunnis, have survived to the present times, and as such they are generally considered as Islam's third major division. Other important movements of the early Islamic times, such as the Murjia who originated in response to the harsh stances of the Khawarij and who adopted a more compromising position regarding other Muslim communities, did not survive long under their own names. There were also famous contemporary theological schools, such as the Mu‘tazila and Maturidism, which disappeared in medieval times after leaving permanent imprints on aspects of Shi‘a and Sunni theology.

Modern scholarship indicates that the early Muslims lived, especially during the first three centuries of their history, in an intellectually dynamic milieu characterised by a multiplicity of communities, schools of thought, and stances on major religio-political issues of the time. On a political level, which remained closely linked to religious perspectives and theological considerations, the diversity in early Islam ranged widely from the viewpoints of those (later designated as Sunnis) who endorsed the historical caliphate to the various oppositional groups (notably the Shi‘a and the Khawarij) who aspired toward the establishment of new orders. In this fluid and intellectually effervescent atmosphere in which ordinary individuals as well as scholars and theorists often moved freely among different communities, Muslims engaged in lively discourses revolving around a host of issues that were of vital significance to the emerging Muslim *umma*. At the time, the Muslims were confronted by many gaps in their religious knowledge and teachings related to issues such as the attributes of God, the source and nature of authority, and the definitions of true believers and sinners. It was under such circumstances that different religious communities and schools of thought formulated their doctrines in stages and acquired their own identities as well as designations that often encapsulated central aspects of their beliefs and practices.

The Sunni Muslims of medieval times, or, more specifically, their religious scholars (*‘ulama’*), painted a picture of early Islam that is at variance with the findings of modern scholarship on the

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subject. According to the Sunnis, who have always regarded themselves as the "true" custodians and interpreters of the "Islamic truth," Islam from early on represented a monolithic community with a well-established doctrinal basis from which various groups then deviated and went astray. Sunni Islam was portrayed by its adherents as the "true Islam," while all non-Sunni communities of the Muslims, especially the Shi'a among them who had allegedly deviated from the right path, were accused of "heresy" (*ilhad*) or even irreligiosity. It is interesting to note that the same highly distorted perceptions and biased classifications came to be adopted in the nineteenth century by the European Orientalists who had then begun their "scientific" study of Islam on the basis of Muslim sources of different genres produced mainly by Sunni authors. Consequently, they, too, endorsed the normativeness of Sunnism and distinguished it from Shi'ism, or any non-Sunni interpretation of Islam, with the use of terms such as "orthodoxy" and "heterodoxy," terms grounded in the Christian experience and inappropriate in an Islamic context. The Shi'a, too, have had their own idealized model of "true Islam" based on a particular interpretation of early Islamic history and a distinctive conception of religious authority vested in the Prophet's family (*ahl al-bayt*). The Shi'a, whose medieval scholars (like their Sunni counterparts) did not generally allow for doctrinal evolution, have also disagreed among themselves regarding the identity of the rightful imams or spiritual leaders of the community. As a result, the Shi'as have in the course of their history subdivided into a number of major communities and minor groupings, each possessing an idealised self-image and rationalising its own legitimacy, usually to the exclusion of other communities.

In short, almost every Muslim community, major or minor in terms of the size of its membership, has developed its own self-image and retrospective perceptions of its earlier history. In such a milieu, characterised by diversity and competing communal interpretations, "true Islam" (or "orthodoxy") defied a universally acceptable definition, although the designation of "heresy" was utilised more readily in reference to certain groups. Such definitions were usually adopted by the religious scholars of particular states, scholars who performed the important function of legitimising the established regimes and refuted their political opponents in return for enjoying privileged social positions among the elite of the society. This is why the perception of "true Islam" depicted as "official Islam" and the "law of the land" has varied so widely over time and space and manifested itself in Sunnism of the Abbasid caliphate, Kharijism of the North African states, Ismaili Shi'ism of the Fatimid caliphate, Nizari Ismaili Shi'ism of the Alamut state, Musta'lian Ismaili Shi'ism of the Sulayhid state in Yemen, Zaydi Shi'ism of the territorial states of the Zaydi dynasties of Yemen and northern Iran, and the Ithna 'Ashariyya or Twelver Shi'ism of Safawid and post-Safawid Iran. Several versions of the so-called "true Islam" existed concurrently in different regions of the Muslim world when for about two centuries the Shi'a Fatimids and the Sunni Abbasids, each ruling over vast territories, were diligently competing with one another for winning the allegiance of the Muslims at large. Under such circumstances, different communities qualified in different states for the status of "heterodoxy" or "heresy" depending on the religious toleration of the various regimes as well as the religio-political strengths and prospects of the communities not associated with the ruling regime and its legitimising *'ulama'* in the particular state.

It is important to emphasise at this juncture that many of the principal disagreements between Sunnis, Shi'as, and other Muslims, as well as the less pronounced differences among the factions of any particular Muslim community, will probably never be satisfactorily explained by modern scholarship because of a lack of reliable sources, especially those dating from early Islam. As is well known, extensive written records dealing with these issues among Muslims have not survived from the first two centuries of Islam, while the later writings produced by historians,

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theologians, and others display their own "sectarian" bias. Any critical study of the formative period of Islam and its tradition of diversity would be severely hampered by important gaps in knowledge of early Muslim history and the biases of the available literature produced later by different Muslim communities.

Diversity in Islam is abundantly attested to in the dissenting or heresiographical literature of the Muslims. The authors of such heresiographies, which were supposedly written to explain the internal divisions of Islam, had one major preoccupation: to prove the legitimacy of the particular community to which the author of any such work belonged, refuting and condemning other communities as heretical. However, the heresiographers used the term *firqa* (plural *firaq*), meaning sect, rather loosely and indiscriminately in reference to a major community, a smaller independent group, a subgroup, a school of thought, or even a minor doctrinal position. As a result, heresiographers, who in a sense gave wide currency to "sectarianism", exaggerated the number of Muslim "sects" in their writings. This may have partly resulted from their misinterpretation of a *hadith* reported from the Prophet. According to this *hadith*, the Prophet had said that "the Jews are divided into 71 sects, and the Christians are divided into 72 sects; and, my people will be divided into 73 sects, all of whom are destined to hell fire except one, and these are the true believers." This *hadith*, as first pointed out by the famous Orientalist I. Goldziher (1850-1921), had evidently come into existence as a result of a misunderstanding of a somewhat similar tradition, which is included in the major compendia of the Prophetic traditions. Ultimately, most heresiographers have arranged their accounts of the Muslim sects so as to adhere to a scheme of some 72 heretical sects, with the author's community depicted as the "saved sect." At any rate, the famous Muslim heresiographers of the medieval times, such as al-Ashari (d. 935-6), al-Baghdadi (d. 1037 CE), and Ibn Hazm (d. 1064 CE), who were devout Sunnis, and al-Shahrastani (d. 1153 CE), the Ashari theologian who may have been an Ismaili, as well as the earliest Shi'a heresiographers, al-Nawbakhti (d. circa 912-3 CE) and al-Qummi (d. 913-4 CE), were much better informed about the teachings of different Muslim communities, which they aimed to refute. As a result, despite their shortcomings and distortions, these heresiographies continue to provide an important source of information for the study of diversity in medieval Islam. It is within such a frame of reference that we shall now present an overview of the major Muslim communities, especially during the formative period of Islam.

**The Emergence of Communities of Interpretation**

The origins of Sunnism and Shi'ism may be traced to the crisis of succession in the Islamic community, and then centered in Medina, following the death of the Prophet Muhammad. According to the message of Islam, Prophet Muhammad was the Seal of the Prophets (*khatim al-anbiya*), and he could not be succeeded by another prophet. However, a successor was needed to assume Prophet Muhammad's functions as leader of the Islamic community and state, ensuring the continued unity of the Muslims under a single leader. According to Sunni Muslims, the Prophet had not explicitly designated a successor, and so this important appointment had to be made. After some heated debate among the leading Muslim groups, including the Companions of the Prophet from among the Meccan Emigrants (*Muhajirun*) and his Medinese Helpers (*Ansar*), the communal choice fell upon Abu Bakr, who became *khalifat rasul Allah*, successor to the Messenger of Allah. This title was soon simplified to *khalifa*, from which the word *caliph* in Western languages originates. By electing the first successor to the Prophet, the Muslims had founded the unique institution of the caliphate. The precise nature of the authority of Abu Bakr and his immediate successors during the earliest decades of Muslim history remains obscure, and modern scholarship is just beginning to take a more analytical look at the nature of caliphal

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authority in early Islam. It is clear, however, that from its inception the historical caliphate embodied not only aspects of the political but also of the religious leadership of the community, while different groups gradually formulated various conceptions of the caliphal religio-political authority and the caliph's moral responsibility toward the community. Abu Bakr led the Muslims for just over two years (632-634 CE); and the next two heads of the Muslim community, 'Umar (634-644 CE) and 'Uthman (644-656 CE), were also installed to the caliphate by various elective procedures. These three early caliphs all belonged to the influential Meccan tribe of Quraysh and they were also among the early converts to Islam and the Companions of the Prophet who had accompanied or followed him on his historic journey from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE. Only the fourth caliph, 'Ali ibn 'Abi Talib (656-661 CE), who occupies a unique position in the annals of Shi'ism, belonged to the Banu Hashim, part of the Prophet's own clan of Quraysh. 'Ali ibn 'Abi Talib was also closely related to the Prophet, being his cousin and son-in-law, and bound by marriage to the Prophet's daughter Fatima.

**The Early Shi'a**

Upon the death of the Prophet there appeared a small group in Medina who believed that 'Ali was better qualified than any other candidate to succeed the Prophet. This minority group, originally comprised of some of 'Ali's friends and supporters, in time expanded and came to be generally designated as the *Shi'at 'Ali*, Party of 'Ali, or simply as the Shi'a. It is the fundamental belief of the Shi'a, including the major communities of Ithna 'Ashariyya, Ismailiyya, and Zaydiyya, that the Prophet had designated a successor or an imam as the Shi'a have preferred to call the leader of the Muslim community. On the basis of specific Qur'anic verses and certain *hadith*s, the Shi'a have maintained that the Prophet designated 'Ali as his successor; a designation or *nass* that had been instituted through divine revelation. Thus, from early on, the Shi'a believed that the succession to the Prophet was the legitimate right of 'Ali. This contention was, however, not accepted by the Muslim majority who supported the caliphate of Abu Bakr and refused to concede that the Prophet had designated a successor. In fact, they had chosen to refer the decision of the caliphate to the *ijma* or consensus of the community. 'Ali's partisans were obliged to protest against the act of choosing the Prophet's successor through elective methods. According to the Shi'a, it was this very protest that separated them from the rest of the Muslims.

Indeed, the Shi'a came to hold a particular conception of religious authority, a conception that was eventually developed in terms of the central Shi'a doctrine of the imamate. According to the Shi'a sources, the partisans of 'Ali believed that the most important issue facing the Muslim community after the death of the Prophet was the elucidation of Islamic teachings. This was because they were aware that the Qur'an and the revealed law of Islam (*shari'a*) had emanated from sources beyond the comprehension of ordinary men. Hence, they believed the Islamic message contained inner truths that could not be understood directly through human reason. In order to understand the true meaning of the Islamic revelation, the Shi'a had recognised the need for a religiously authoritative teacher and guide, the imam. According to this view, the possibility of a Shi'a interpretation existed within the very message of Islam, and this possibility was merely actualised in Shi'ism.

The Shi'a, then, adhered to their own distinctive conception of authority and leadership in the community. While the majority who endorsed the historical caliphate came to consider the caliph as the administrator and guardian of the *shari'a* and leader of the community, the Shi'a, in addition, saw in the succession to the Prophet an important spiritual function. As a result, the successor also had to possess legitimate authority for elucidating the teachings of Islam and for

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providing spiritual guidance for the Muslims. According to the Shi‘a, a person with such qualifications could belong only to the *ahl al-bayt*, eventually defined to include only certain members of the Prophet’s immediate family, notably ‘Ali and Fatima and their progeny. At any rate, it seems that ‘Ali was from the beginning considered by his devoted partisans as the most prominent member of the Prophet’s family, and as such, he was believed to have inherited a true understanding of the Prophet’s teachings and religious knowledge or *‘ilm*. According to the Shi‘a, ‘Ali’s unique qualifications as successor to the Prophet held another dimension in that he was believed to have been designated by divine command. This meant that ‘Ali was also divinely inspired and immune from error and sin (*masum*), making him infallible both in his knowledge and as an authoritative teacher or imam after the Prophet. In sum, it was the Shi‘a view that the two ends of governing the community and exercising religious authority could be discharged only by ‘Ali.

This Shi‘a point of view on the origins of Shi‘ism contains distinctive doctrinal elements that cannot be entirely attributed to the early Shi‘a, especially the original partisans of ‘Ali. At any rate, emphasising hereditary attributes of the individuals and the imam’s kinship to the Prophet as a prerequisite for possessing the required religious knowledge, the Shi‘a later also held that after ‘Ali, the leadership of the Muslim community was the exclusive right of certain descendants of ‘Ali, the ‘Alids, who belonged to the *ahl al-bayt* and possessed religious authority. The earliest Shi‘a currents of thought developed gradually, finding their full formulation and consolidation in the doctrine of the imamate, expounded in its fundamental form at the time of the imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq (d. 765 CE).

Pro-‘Alid sentiments and Shi‘ism remained in a dormant state during the earliest decades of Muslim history. But Shi‘a aspirations were revived during the caliphate of ‘Uthman, initiating a period of strife and civil war in the community. Diverse grievances against ‘Uthman’s policies finally erupted into open rebellion, culminating in the murder of the caliph in Medina in 656 CE at the hands of rebel contingents from the provinces. In the aftermath of this murder, the Muslim community became divided over the question of ‘Uthman’s behavior as a basis for justification of the rebels’ actions, and soon the disagreements found expression in terms of broad theoretical discussions revolving around the question of the rightful leadership, caliphate or imamate, in the Muslim community. Matters came to a head in the caliphate of ‘Ali, who had succeeded ‘Uthman. ‘Ali’s caliphal authority was challenged by Mu‘awiya, the powerful governor of Syria and leader of a pro-‘Uthman party. As a member of the influential Banu Umayya and a relative of ‘Uthman, Mu‘awiya found the call for avenging the slain caliph a suitable pretext for establishing Umayyad rule.

It was under such circumstances that the forces of ‘Ali and Mu‘awiya met at Siffin on the upper Euphrates in the spring of 657 CE. The events of Siffin, the most controversial battle in early Muslim history, was followed by a Syrian arbitration proposal. ‘Ali’s acceptance of it and the resulting arbitration verdict issued sometime later, all had critical consequences for the early Muslim community. It was also during this prolonged conflict that different groups seceded from ‘Ali’s forces, the seceders being subsequently designated as the Khawarij or Kharijis. During the last two years of the civil war, ‘Ali rapidly lost ground to Mu‘awiya. Soon after ‘Ali’s murder, at the hand of a Khariji in 661 CE, Mu‘awiya was recognised as the new de facto caliph by the majority of the Muslims except the Shi‘a and the Khawarij. Mu‘awiya also succeeded in founding the Umayyad caliphate that ruled the Muslim state on a dynastic basis for nearly a century (661-750 CE).

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The Muslims emerged from their first civil war severely tested and split into factions or parties that differed in their interpretation of the rightful leadership of the community and the caliph's moral responsibility. These factions, which began to acquire definite shape in the aftermath of the murder of 'Uthman and the battle of Siffin, gradually developed their doctrinal positions and acquired distinct identities as separate communities of interpretation. They also continued to confront each other in theological discourses as well as on the battlefield throughout the Umayyad dynasty and in later times. These parties acquired denominations that revealed their personal loyalties.

The upholders of 'Uthman as a just caliph, commonly designated as 'Uthmaniyya, had accepted the verdict of the arbitrators appointed at Siffin and held that 'Uthman had been murdered unjustly. Consequently, they repudiated the rebellion against 'Uthman and the resulting caliphate of 'Ali. In addition to the partisans of Mu'awiya, the 'Uthmaniyya included the upholders of the principles of the early caliphate, namely the rights of the non-Hashimid early Companions of the Prophet to the caliphate. The partisans of 'Ali, the *Shi'at 'Ali*, who now also referred to themselves as the *Shi'at ahl al-bayt* or its equivalent *Shi'at al Muhammad* (Party of the Prophet's Household), upheld the justice of the rebellion against 'Uthman, who, according to them, had invalidated his rule by his unjust acts. Repudiating the claims of Mu'awiya to leadership as the avenger of 'Uthman, they now aimed to re-establish rightful leadership or imamate in the community through the Hashimids, members of the Prophet's clan of Banu Hashim, and notably through 'Ali's sons. However, the support of the *ahl al-bayt* by the Shi'a at this time did not as yet imply a repudiation of the first two caliphs.

**The Khawarij**

The Khawarij, who originally seceded in different waves from 'Ali's Kufan army in opposition to his arbitration agreement with Mu'awiya after the battle of Siffin, shared the view of the Shi'a concerning 'Uthman and the rebellion against him. They upheld the initial legitimacy of 'Ali's caliphate but repudiated him from the time of his agreeing to the arbitration of his conflict with Mu'awiya. They also repudiated Mu'awiya for having rebelled against 'Ali when his caliphate was still legitimate. The Khawarij were strictly uncompromising in their application of the theocratic principle of Islam expressed in their slogan "judgment belongs to God alone." Even caliphs, according to them, were to submit unconditionally to this principle as embodied in the Qur'an. If caliphs failed to observe this rule, then they were to repent or be removed from the caliphate by force despite any valuable services they might have rendered to Islam. This is why they equally condemned 'Uthman and 'Ali and also dissociated themselves from Mu'awiya who had unjustly challenged 'Ali's initially legitimate caliphate.

The Khawarij posed fundamental questions concerning the definitions of a true believer, the Muslim community, its rightful leader, and the basis for the leader's authority. As a result, they contributed significantly to doctrinal disputations in the Muslim community. The Khawarij adhered to strict Islamic egalitarianism, maintaining that every meritorious Muslim of any ethnic origin, Arab or non-Arab, could be chosen through popular election as the legitimate leader or imam of the community. They aimed to establish a form of "Islamic democracy" in which leadership and authority could not be based on tribal and hereditary considerations or on any other attributes of individuals other than religious piety. They also had a strong communal spirit, regarding their community as the only "saved community." However, it was not mere membership in the Khariji community but strict adherence to religious tenets and conduct, covering both faith and works, that defined the status of a believer and guaranteed his salvation.

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Rejecting the doctrine of justification by faith without works propounded later by other communities of interpretation, the Khawarij professed a form of radical puritanism or moral austerity and readily considered anyone, even the caliph, as an apostate, if in their view he had slightly deviated from the right conduct. By committing a minor sin, a believer could thus become irrevocably an unbeliever deserving of dissociation. The Khariji insistence on right conduct, and the lack of any institutional form of authority among them, proved highly detrimental to the unity of their movement, characterised from early on by extreme factionalism. Heresiographers name a multitude of Khariji "sects," most of which were continuously engaged in insurrectional activities especially in the eastern provinces of the Muslim world where they controlled extensive territories in Iran for long periods.

The Azariqa represented the most radical community among the Khawarij. They considered as polytheists (*mushrikun*) and infidels (*kuffar*) all non-Kharijis and even those Kharijis who had not joined their camp. They held the killing of these sinners, who could never reenter the faith, along with their wives and children, licit. The Azariqa established several communities in different parts of Iran. Later, Ibn Ajarrad, who may have been from Balkh, founded the Ajarida branch of Kharijism. Heresiographers name some fifteen groups of the Ajarida who were specific to eastern Iran and were more moderate in their views and policies than the Azariqa. The most moderate Khariji community was represented by the Ibadiyya, today the sole survivors of the Khawarij. The Ibadis considered the non-Ibadi Muslims, as well as the sinners of their own community, not as polytheists but merely as "infidels by ingratitude," and, as such, it was forbidden to kill or capture them in peacetime. In general, the Ibadis were more reluctant than other Kharijis to take up arms against other Muslims. In contrast, they were deeply engaged in the study of religious sciences and made important early contributions to the elaboration of legal and theological doctrines in Islam.

**Development of the Shi‘a Community**

The early Shi‘a, a small and zealous opposition party centered in Kufa in southern Iraq, survived ‘Ali’s murder and numerous subsequent tragic events during the Umayyad period. Upon ‘Ali’s death, the Shi‘a recognised his eldest son Hasan as their new imam. Meanwhile, Hasan had also been acclaimed as caliph in succession to ‘Ali, in Kufa, ‘Ali’s former capital. However, Mu‘awiya speedily succeeded in inducing Hasan’s abdication from the caliphate. Shi‘ism remained subdued under Hasan who refrained from any political activity. On Hasan’s death in 669 CE, the Shi‘a revived their aspirations for restoring the caliphate to the ‘Alids, now headed by their next imam, Husayn, the second son of ‘Ali and Fatima. The Shi‘a persistently invited Husayn to their midst in Kufa to launch a rebellion against the Umayyads. The tragic martyrdom of the Prophet’s grandson, Husayn, and his small band of relatives and companions at Karbala, near Kufa, where they were brutally massacred by an Umayyad army in 680 CE, played an important role in the consolidation of the Shi‘a ethos, leading to the formation of radical trends among the partisans of ‘Ali and the *ahl al-bayt*. The earliest of such radical trends, which left lasting marks on Shi‘ism, became manifest a few years later in the movement of al-Mukhtar.

Al-Mukhtar organised his own Shi‘a movement, with a general call for avenging Husayn’s murder in the name of Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya, ‘Ali’s third son and Husayn’s half-brother. Of much greater significance was al-Mukhtar’s proclamation of this Muhammad as the Mahdi, "the divinely guided one," the messianic saviour imam and the restorer of Islam who would establish justice on earth and deliver the oppressed from tyranny. This new eschatological concept of the imam-Mahdi was a very important doctrinal innovation, proving particularly

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appealing to the *mawali*, the non-Arab converts to Islam who, under the Umayyads, represented a large intermediary class between the Arab Muslims and the non-Muslim subjects of the Islamic state. The *mawali*, comprised of Aramean, Persian, and other non-Arab Muslims, represented second-class citizens in comparison to Arab Muslims. As a large and underprivileged social class concentrated in urban milieus and aspiring for the establishment of a state and society that would observe the egalitarian teachings of Islam, the *mawali* provided a valuable recruiting ground for any movement opposed to the exclusively Arab hegemony of the Umayyads. The *mawali* did, in fact, join the Khawarij and participated in many Khariji revolts. Above all, they became involved in Shi‘ism, starting with the movement of al-Mukhtar. By attempting to remove their grievances and through the appeal of the idea of the Mahdi, al-Mukhtar easily succeeded in drawing the *mawali* to his movement. They now began to call themselves the *Shi‘at al-Mahdi* (Party of the Mahdi). Al-Mukhtar speedily won control of Kufa in an open revolt in 685 CE. The success of al-Mukhtar proved short-lived, but his movement survived his demise in 687 CE and Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya’s death in 700 CE, and it continued under the general name of Kaysaniyya. This name, like many other community names, was coined by heresiographers.

The Kaysaniyya elaborated some of the doctrines that came to distinguish the radical wing of Shi‘ism. For instance, they condemned the first three caliphs before ‘Ali as illegitimate usurpers and also held that the community had gone astray by accepting their rule. They considered ‘Ali and his three sons, Hasan, Husayn, and Muhammad, as their four imams, successors to the Prophet, who had been divinely appointed and were endowed with supernatural attributes. Many such ideas, first developed by different Kaysani groups, were subsequently adopted by other Shi‘a communities. This explains why most Shi‘a groups in time came to accuse the majority of the early companions of the Prophet of apostasy, which also led to the general Shi‘a vilification (*sabb*) of the first three caliphs. Meanwhile, the ‘Uthmaniyya had adopted their own anti-Shi‘a policies, such as the cursing of ‘Ali from the pulpits after Friday prayers, a policy instituted by Mu‘awiya. Many of the ‘Alids and their partisans from different Shi‘a groups were also continuously persecuted on the orders of the Umayyads and their officials in Iraq and elsewhere.

It was in the aftermath of the Shi‘a revolt of al-Mukhtar that the religio-political movement known as Murjia appeared in Kufa, advocating a return to unity among the Muslims by refuting all extreme partisan views concerning the caliphate. The early Murjia held that judgment of the conduct of ‘Uthman and ‘Ali should be deferred (*irja*) to Allah, while the caliphates of Abu Bakr and ‘Umar deserved praise and emulation. The early Murjia thus distanced themselves from the radical Shi‘as, who now repudiated the first three caliphs, from the Khawarij who condemned both ‘Uthman and ‘Ali, and from the ‘Uthmaniyya who condemned ‘Ali. In general, the Murjia held that Muslims should not fight one another except in self-defense. The sources name Muhammad ibn Hanafiyya’s son Hasan as the original author of the doctrine of *irja*, a Qur’anic term meaning “to defer judgment.” The movement of the Murjia soon spread to Khurasan and Transoxania, where it became particularly identified with the cause of the *mawali*. The Murjia campaigned for the equality of the Arab and non-Arab Muslims, and the exemption from paying the special poll tax (*jizya*) levied on non-Muslim subjects of the Muslim state. In that context, the Murjia advocated the identity of faith (*iman*) with belief and confession of Islam to the exclusion of acts, namely the performance of the ritual and legal obligations of Islam. This meant that the legal status of a Muslim and of a true believer could not be denied to those new, non-Arab converts on the pretext that they ignored or failed to perform some of the essential duties of the Muslims. In time, the Murjia, too, split into several groups, some developing close relations with certain Sunni schools of law and theology.

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From the time of al-Mukhtar's movement, different Shi'a communities and groups, consisting of Arabs and *mawali*, had come to coexist, each one having its own imam and developing its own teachings, and individuals moved rather freely from one Shi'a community to another. Furthermore, the Shi'a imams now issued not only from the three major branches of the extended 'Alid family - the Husaynids (descendants of Husayn ibn 'Ali), the Hanafids (descendants of Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya), and, later, the Hasanids (descendants of Hasan ibn 'Ali ) - but also from other branches of the Prophet's clan of Banu Hashim. This was because the Prophet's family, whose sanctity was supreme for the Shi'a, was then still defined broadly in its old tribal sense. It was later, after the accession of the Abbasids, that the Shi'a began to define the *ahl al-bayt* more restrictively to include only the descendants of the Prophet through Fatima and 'Ali, known as the Fatimids (covering both the Hasanid and the Husaynid 'Alids), while the bulk of the non-Zaydi Shi'as came to acknowledge a particular Husaynid line of imams. At any rate, during this second phase in the formative period of Shi'ism, the Shi'as did not accord general recognition to any single line of imams, from which various dissident groups would diverge in favor of alternative claimants to the imamate.

In this fluid and confusing setting, Shi'ism developed in terms of two main branches or trends. Later, another 'Alid movement led to the formation of yet another Shi'a community known as the Zaydiyya. A radical branch, in terms of both doctrine and policy, evolved out of al-Mukhtar's movement and accounted for the allegiance of the bulk of the Shi'as until shortly after the Abbasid revolution. This branch, breaking away from the religiously moderate attitudes of the early Kufan Shi'a and generally designated as the Kaysaniyya by the heresiographers, was comprised of a number of interrelated groups recognising various Hanafid 'Alids and other Hashimids as their imams. By the end of the Umayyad period, the majority body of the Kaysaniyya, namely the Hashimiyya, transferred their allegiance to the Abbasid family. With this transference, the Abbasids also inherited the party and the missionary or *da'wa* organisation, which became the main instruments for the eventual success of the Abbasid revolution.

The various Kaysani communities drew mainly on the support of the superficially Islamicised *mawali* in southern Iraq and elsewhere. The *mawali*, drawing on diverse pre-Islamic traditions, played an important part in transforming Shi'ism from an Arab party of limited size and doctrinal basis to a dynamic movement. The Kaysani Shi'as elaborated some of the beliefs that came to characterise the radical branch of Shi'ism. Many of the Kaysani doctrines were propounded by the *ghulat*, "exaggerators," who were accused by the more moderate Shi'as of later times of exaggeration (*ghuluww*) in religious matters. In addition to their condemnation of the early caliphs preceding 'Ali, the most common feature of the earliest ideas propagated by the Shi'a *ghulat* was the attribution of superhuman qualities to the imams. The early *ghulat* speculated rather freely on a host of issues and they were responsible for many doctrinal innovations, including the spiritual interpretations of the Day of Judgment, Resurrection, Paradise, and Hell. They also held a cyclical view of the religious history of mankind in terms of eras initiated by different prophets. The Shi'a *ghulat* also speculated on the nature of Allah, often with tendencies toward anthropomorphism (*tashbih*). Many of them believed in the independence of the soul from the body, allowing for *tanasukh* or the transmigration of the soul from one body to another.

The Shi'a *ghulat*, like other contemporary Muslims, also concerned themselves with the status of the true believer. Emphasising the acknowledgment of and the obedience to the rightful Shi'a imam of the time as the most essential religious obligation of the true believer, the role of the developing *shari'a* became less important for these radical Shi'as. These Kaysani Shi'as seem to have regarded the particular details and the ritual prescriptions of the sacred law of Islam, such as

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prayer and fasting, as not binding on those who knew and were devoted to the true imam from the *ahl al-bayt*. Consequently, they were often accused of advocating that faith alone was necessary for salvation, and of tolerating libertinism. Much of the intellectual heritage of the Kaysaniyya was later absorbed into the teachings of the main Shi‘a communities of the early Abbasid times. Politically, too, the Kaysaniyya pursued an activist policy, condemning Abu Bakr, ‘Umar, and ‘Uthman as well as the Umayyads as usurpers of the rights of ‘Ali and his descendants, aiming to restore the caliphate to the ‘Alids. As a result, several Kaysani groups, led by their various *ghulat* theorists, engaged in revolutionary activities against the Umayyad regime, especially in or around Kufa, the cradle of Shi‘ism. However, as all these Shi‘a revolts were poorly organised and their scenes were too close to the centers of caliphal power, they proved abortive.

In the meantime, there had appeared a second major branch or wing of Shi‘ism, later designated as the imamiyya. This branch, with its limited initial following, remained completely removed from any antiregime political activity. The Imami Shi‘as, who, like other Shi‘as of the time, were centered in Kufa, recognised a line of ‘Alid imams after ‘Ali, Hasan, and Husayn, tracing the imamate through Husayn’s sole surviving son ‘Ali ibn al-Husayn, who received the honorific epithet of Zayn al-Abidin, “the Ornament of the Pious.” It was through Zayn al-Abidin’s son and successor as imam, Muhammad al-Baqir, that the Husaynid imams and Imami community began to acquire their particular identity and prominence within Shi‘ism. Al-Baqir refrained from any political activity and concerned himself solely with the religious aspects of his authority, developing the rudiments of some of the ideas that were to become the legitimist principles of the imamiyya. Above all, he seems to have concerned himself with explaining the functions and attributes of the imams.

During the final Umayyad decades, with the rise of different theological and legal schools upholding conflicting views, many Shi‘a sought the guidance of their imam as an authoritative teacher. Al-Baqir was the first imam of the Husaynid line to perform this role, and he acquired an increasing number of partisans who regarded him as the sole legitimate religious authority of the time. In line with his quiescent policy, al-Baqir is also credited with introducing the important Shi‘a principle of *taqiyya*, precautionary disguising of one’s true religious belief in the face of danger. This principle was later adopted by the Ithna ‘Ashariyya and Ismaili Shi‘a communities, and it particularly served to save the Ismailis from much persecution throughout their history.

It may be pointed out at this juncture that al-Baqir’s imamate also coincided with the initial stages of the Islamic science of law (‘*ilm al fiqh*). It was, however, in the final decades of the second century of Muslim history that the old Arabian concept of *sunna*, the normative custom of the community that had reasserted itself under Islam, came to be explicitly identified with the *sunna* of the Prophet. This identification necessitated the collection of those *hadith*s or traditions, claimed reports of the sayings and actions of the Prophet, transmitted orally through an uninterrupted chain of trustworthy authorities. The activity of collecting and studying *hadith* for citing the authority of the Prophet to determine proper legal practices soon became a major field of Islamic learning, complementing the science of Islamic jurisprudence. In this formative period of the Muslim religious sciences, al-Baqir has been mentioned as a reporter of *hadith*, particularly of those supporting the Shi‘a cause and derived from ‘Ali. However, the imams al-Baqir and his successor Ja‘far al-Sadiq interpreted the law mostly on their own authority without much recourse to *hadith* from earlier authorities. It should be added that in Shi‘ism, *hadith* is reported on the authority of the imams and it includes their sayings in addition to the Prophetic Traditions. Having laid the foundations of the Imami branch of Shi‘ism, the common heritage of the great Shi‘a communities of Ithna ‘Ashariyya and Ismailiyya, the imam Muhammad al-Baqir died

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around 732 CE, a century after the death of the Prophet. It was during the long imamate of al-Baqir's son and successor Ja'far al-Sadiq that the Shi'a movement of his uncle Zayd ibn 'Ali unfolded, leading eventually to the separate Zaydi community of Shi'ism.

**The Zaydis and Imamis**

Few details are available on the ideas propagated by Zayd and his original associates. Similar to the Khawarij, Zayd seems to have emphasised the need for a just imam and the community's obligation to remove an unjust leader. He also paid particular attention to the Islamic principle of "commanding the good and prohibiting the evil" (*al-amr bilmaruf walnahy an al-munkar*). He is also reported to have taught that if an imam wanted to be recognised, he had to assert his rights publicly with sword in hand, if required. In other words, Zayd did not attach any significance to hereditary succession to the imamate, nor was he prepared to accept the eschatological idea of the occultation (*ghayba*) and return *(raja)* of an imam-Mahdi, an idea propagated by different Kaysani and, later, Imami groups. Thus, the Zaydis originally maintained that the imamate might legitimately be held by any member of the *ahl al-bayt*, though later restricted it only to the Hasanid and Husaynid 'Alids. They did not consider the imams as divinely protected from error and sin either. The claimant to the imamate had to possess the required religious learning. He would also have to be capable of launching an uprising, as Zayd himself was to do, against the illegitimate ruler of the time. Accordingly, there could be long periods without a legitimate Zaydi imam.

Zayd also realised that in order to achieve success in combating the Umayyads, he would need the support of a main body of the Muslims. It was to this end, and reflecting the moderate stances of the early Kufan Shi'a, that Zayd made an important doctrinal compromise. He asserted that although 'Ali was the most excellent (*al-afdal*) person for succeeding the Prophet, the allegiance given by the early Muslims to Abu Bakr and 'Umar who were less excellent (*al-mafdul*) was, nevertheless, valid. This view was, however, repudiated by the later Zaydis. Zayd's recognition of the rule of the first two caliphs won him the general sympathy of all those Muslims upholding the unity of the Muslim community. At any rate, Zayd's movement survived his abortive Kufan revolt of 740 CE. Henceforth, the Zaydis retained their moderate views in the doctrinal field. Not only did they adopt conservative stances in elaborating the religious status of their imams, but they also continued to refrain from condemning the early caliphs before 'Ali and the rest of the Muslim community for having failed to support the legitimate rights of 'Ali and his descendants. Politically, the Zaydis maintained their militant position, advocating insurrections against the illegitimate rulers of the time. Led by different 'Alid imams after Zayd, the Zaydis succeeded by the second half of the ninth century CE to establish two territorial states, one in Yemen and another one in the Caspian region of northern Iran. In time, the Zaydis were subdivided into several communities.

The imamiyya expanded significantly and became an important religious community during the long and eventful imamate of al-Baqir's son and successor Ja'far al-Sadiq, the foremost scholar and teacher among the Husaynid imams. This happened particularly after the victory of the Abbasids who had preached their religio-political propaganda or *da'wa* in the name of the *ahl al-bayt* largely on a Shi'a basis, but, after supplanting the Umayyads in 750 CE, they installed their own dynasty to the caliphate to the great disappointment of the Shi'as who had all along expected the 'Alids to accede to the leadership of the Muslim community. Shi'a disillusionment was further felt when the Abbasids, soon after their victory, adopted persecutionary measures against the 'Alids and their Shi'a supporters. In the meantime, the Kaysani Shi'ism of the Umayyad times

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had largely aborted in the Abbasid cause. It was under such circumstances that Ja‘far al-Sadiq emerged as the main rallying point for the allegiance of the Shi‘as.

Maintaining the Imami tradition of remaining aloof from any revolutionary activity, Ja‘far al-Sadiq had gradually acquired a widespread reputation as a religious scholar and teacher, and, besides his own partisans, large numbers of Muslims studied or consulted with him including Abu Hanifa al-Nu‘man (d. 767 CE) and Malik ibn Anas (d. 795 CE), the famous jurists and eponymous founders of the Hanafi and Maliki schools of law. In time, al-Sadiq also acquired a noteworthy circle of Imami thinkers and associates that included some of the most learned scholars and theologians of the time, such as Hisham ibn al-Hakam (d. 795 CE), the foremost representative of Imami *kalam* or scholastic theology. As a result of the intense intellectual activities of the imam al-Sadiq and his associates, the imamiyya now came to possess a distinctive legal school together with a body of ritual and theological thought.

The central doctrine of Imami thought, however, has been the doctrine of the imamate, which was formulated in al-Sadiq’s time. This doctrine, essentially retained by the later Ithna ‘Ashariyya and Ismaili Shi‘as, was based on the belief in the permanent need of mankind for a divinely guided, sinless, and infallible (*ma‘sum*) leader or imam who, after the Prophet Muhammad, would act as the authoritative teacher and guide of men in all their religious and spiritual affairs. The imam can practice *taqiyya*, and although he is entitled to temporal leadership as much as to religious authority, his mandate does not depend on his actual rule or any attempt at gaining it. It was further maintained that the Prophet himself had designated ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib as his *wasi* (successor) by an explicit designation (*nass*), under divine command. However, the majority of the Companions of the Prophet had apostatised by ignoring this testament. After ‘Ali, the imamate was to be transmitted from father to son by *nass*, among the descendants of ‘Ali and Fatima, and after al-Husayn, in the Husaynid line until the end of time. This imam is also endowed by God with special knowledge or *‘ilm*, and has perfect understanding of the exoteric (*zahir*) and esoteric (*batin*) aspects and meanings of the Qur’an and the message of Islam. Indeed, the world could not exist for a moment without such an imam, the proof of Allah (*hujjat Allah*) on earth. Even if only two men were left upon the face of the earth, one of them would be the imam as there can only be a single imam at any one time. The recognition of the true imam and obedience to him were made the absolute duty of every believer, while the ignorance or rejection of such an imam would be tantamount to infidelity. Having consolidated Shi‘ism and laid a solid foundation for its subsequent doctrinal development, Ja‘far al-Sadiq, the last imam recognised by both the Ithna ‘Asharis and Ismailis, died in 765 CE. The dispute over his succession led to permanent divisions in the Imami Shi‘a community.

**The Ithna ‘Ashari Imami Shi‘a**

On Ja‘far al-Sadiq’s death, the Imami Shi‘a split into several groups. A large number recognised al-Sadiq’s son ‘Abd Allah al-Aftah. These Shi‘a, known as Fathiyya, maintained some prominence until the tenth century CE. When ‘Abd Allah died shortly after his father, however, the bulk of his supporters went over to his half-brother Musa ibn Ja‘far al-Kazim who had already been acknowledged as his father’s successor by a faction of the Imamiyya. Musa, later counted as the seventh imam of the Ithna ‘Asharis, refrained from all political activity, an Imami tradition retained by his successors. On Musa’s death in 799 CE, one group of his partisans acknowledged the imamate of his eldest son ‘Ali ibn Musa al-Rida, later becoming the heir apparent of the Abbasid caliph al-Mamun who had attempted a temporary rapprochement with the ‘Alids. When ‘Ali al-Rida died in 818 CE, most of his followers traced the imamate through four more imams,

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while others followed different ‘Alid imams. At any rate, it was this subgroup of the Imamiyya that eventually became known as the Ithna ‘Asharis, or the Twelvers. This title refers to all those Imami Shi‘as who recognised a line of twelve imams, starting with ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib and ending with Muhammad ibn al-Hasan whose emergence as Mahdi has been awaited since 873 CE. Twelver Shi‘ism has remained the “official” religion of Iran since 1501 CE.

**The Shi‘a Ismailis**

In the meantime, two other groups from the Imami Shi‘as supported Ismail ibn Ja‘far, the original designated successor of the imam al-Sadiq, on al-Sadiq’s death. These Kufan-based groups represented the earliest Ismailis who were soon organised into a rapidly expanding community representing the most politically active wing of Shi‘ism. By the middle of the ninth century, the Ismaili *da‘wa* or religio-political propaganda had begun to appear in many regions of the Muslim world. The Shi‘a message of this *da‘wa*, based on an anti-Abbasid campaign and the promise of justice under the rule of the Ismaili imam, was successfully preached by numerous *da‘i*s or missionaries in Iraq, Yemen, Iran, Central Asia, and elsewhere, appealing to different strata of the society.

By 899 CE, the Ismaili imams, who had hitherto led the movement secretly from different headquarters, emerged from their underground existence. It was around that same time that a faction of the Ismaili community, later designated as Qarmati, disagreed with the central leadership of the movement over certain doctrinal issues and seceded. The Qarmati dissidents, who soon founded a powerful state of their own in Bahrayn, eastern Arabia, engaged in prolonged devastating activities against the loyal Ismailis and other Muslims. The ravaging activities of the Qarmatis, culminating in their attack on Mecca in 930 CE, were capitalised on by the Muslim enemies of the Ismailis in order to discredit the entire Ismaili community.

The success of the early Ismaili *da‘wa* was crowned in 909 CE by the establishment of the Fatimid caliphate (909-1171 CE) in North Africa, under the direct leadership of the Ismaili imams who traced their ancestry to ‘Ali and the Prophet’s daughter Fatima. The Fatimid caliph-imams, who had successfully challenged the legitimacy of the Abbasids, now became ready targets for the polemical attacks of the Abbasids and their legitimising *‘ulama’*. In later times, the Ismailis themselves became subdivided into a number of major communities and minor groupings. A particular state centered at the mountain fortress of Alamut with territories in Iran and Syria was founded in the 1090s CE by the leaders of the Nizari branch of Ismailism. Currently, the bulk of the Ismailis of the world, who belong to the majority Nizari branch, recognise as their forty-ninth present and living imam, His Highness Karim Aga Khan.

**The Mu‘tazila**

Meanwhile, by the late Umayyad decades, yet another religious movement had gained prominence in the Muslim community. This was the movement of the Mu‘tazila, the defenders of human rationality, that arose in Basra with the aim of reuniting the Muslims on a compromise solution of the disputes among the various religio-political parties. The early Mu‘tazilis were, however, mainly theologians who focused their attention on theological principles with a side interest in the issues related to the rightful leadership of the community.

In agreement with the Khariji position, the Mu‘tazilis also emphasised the need for a just imam and the community’s obligation to remove an unjust one. They were, however, opposed to the

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Khariji condemnation of ‘Uthman and ‘Ali and their partisans as infidels. In fact, they preferred to suspend the ultimate judgment on all the parties involved in these conflicts. They supported some of the Umayyad and early Abbasid caliphs while refuting others. Indeed, for several decades until 848 CE, Mu‘tazilism was the official doctrine of the Abbasid court. However, by the latter decades of the ninth century CE, Mu‘tazilism had become increasingly pro-‘Alid, and it left permanent influences on Zaydi and Imami Shi‘ism.

Emphasising rationalism, in the sense that a certain awareness is accessible to man by means of his intelligence alone in the absence of any revelation, the early Mu‘tazilis became known for five principles on which they had reached a consensus of opinion. These principles, with a number of related theological issues, included the unity of God (*tawhid*) and the divine attributes, the justice of God (*adl*), and the theory of an intermediate state (*al-manzila bayn al-manzilatayn*), according to which a sinful Muslim cannot be classified either as a believer (*mumin*) or an infidel (*kafir*) but belongs to a separate intermediate category. Acknowledged as a major school of theology in early Islam, Mu‘tazilism began to lose its prominence during the tenth century CE to other theological schools, notably Asharism and Maturidism.

**The Community of the Ahl al-Sunna (Sunnis)**

By the early Abbasid times, as noted, there had also appeared distinctive schools of law, such as the Hanafi and Maliki, named after their jurist-founders at the same time that Shi‘a and Khariji communities were developing their own legal doctrines. It is beyond the scope of this article to investigate the evolution of these legal schools and the early history of the various theological movements of the Abbasid times, including particularly the two most important schools of Sunni *kalam* founded by Abu a1-Hasan al-Ashari (d. 935-6 CE) and Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (d. 944 CE). We have also refrained from considering the organised Sufi orders that later developed their own mystical interpretations of Islam and the spiritual path (*tariqa*) to “truth,” transcending Sunni-Shi‘a-Khariji divisions. Nor have we dealt with the inquiries of the *falasifa*, the Muslim philosophers who formulated highly complex metaphysical systems drawing on different Hellenistic traditions and the teachings of Islam. Nonetheless, our survey attests sufficiently to the prevalence of pluralism in early Islam, which was characterised by a diversity of communities, movements, and schools of interpretation, none having had any monopoly over the sole interpretation of the Islamic message.

Within this perspective, it is also important to bear in mind that by the second century of Muslim history, there was no single community representing even what eventually became the Sunni interpretation of Islam. It was over the course of Muslim history that the majority of Muslims thought of themselves as the *ahl al-sunna* (People of the *sunna*), or simply as the Sunnis. This designation was used not because the majority were more attached than others to the *sunna* of the Prophet, but because they claimed to be the adherents to the correct Prophetic Traditions, also upholding the unity of the community. Different currents of what later became identified as Sunni Islam were elaborated gradually, as in the case of Shi‘ism and other interpretations of Islam. For instance, Sunni doctrine on the *imamate* drew on the ideas of the earlier ‘Uthmaniyya and the Murjia, aiming to defend the historical caliphate against the threats posed by the claims of the opposition movements. However, Sunnis, too, differed among themselves on theological and legal doctrines. For instance, on the matter of defining faith, there developed two opposing views in the Sunni camp. One group, associated with the Hanafi school of law and supported by the Maturidi school of theology, essentially defined faith as knowledge to the exclusion of acts. According to another view, upheld by the Hanbali school of law and Ashari theology and also

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reflected in the cannonical collections of Sunni *hadith*, faith would also require the inclusion of acts. This latter view has also become known as Sunni traditionalism. In contrast, the Shafi‘i school of law, unlike Hanafism and Hanbalism, was essentially a legal school without strong interests in theological doctrines. In fact, the bulk of the early Shafi‘is were opposed to speculative reasoning used by the Muslim theologians. There were numerous other disagreements within every legal or theological school of thought associated with Sunni Islam. However, Maturidism, which became prevalent in Sunni Islam after the disappearance of Mu‘tazilism, in broad terms provided the common theology of the Hanafis while Ash‘arism eventually became the dominant theology of the Shafi‘is and Malikis.

While it is difficult to speak of "orthodoxy" even within Sunnism, the emergence of a powerful class of religious scholars (*‘ulama’*) in the Abbasid state from around the middle of the ninth century led to a consolidated Sunni group as elaborated by the same "Sunni" *‘ulama’* who had now come to possess religious authority under the aegis of the state.

One aspect of the definition of Muslim belief undertaken by Sunni scholars was the articulation of statements that constituted a creed. Abu Hanifa (d. 767 CE), the founder of the Hanafi school of Sunni law, and other major figures such as al-Ashari (d. 935 CE), al-Shafi‘i (d. 820 CE) and al-Ghazali (d. 1111 CE) further elaborated and consolidated this process of systematising belief. Some of the key elements of these creeds emphasised particular perspectives on understanding the foundational beliefs common to all Muslims. Al-Ashari, for example, emphasised belief in the Qur’an as Allah’s uncreated word (in contrast to the beliefs of the Mu‘tazila); he acknowledged the pre-eminent status of the Companions of the Prophet, without discriminating among them, but giving priority to the role of the first four caliphs; he emphasised the idea of *sunna* (tradition), authenticated on the basis of authoritative claims of transmission related from acknowledged transmitters and constituting a consensus of Sunni scholars; and lastly, he decried innovation in matters of belief and practice.

Such creedal statements, combined with the role of the Sunni scholars and jurists as custodians and interpreters of the faith, developed into a broad synthesis to which the composite term, Sunni, came to be applied. The major Sunni schools of law agreed on the principle that Muslim tradition and practice were best preserved through a legal and theological methodology founded on the collective consensus and interpretation of the learned scholars and jurists of the earlier period. The authoritative role and shared sense of purpose was integrated into the larger workings of the state so that the major ruling dynasties incorporated them into the structure of the state, endowing them with a role and a status in matters of governance and daily life. Sunni scholars and institutions of learning thus played a major role in mediating political authority and the role of the *shari‘a* in Muslim society.

Muslim diversity and pluralism continues down to our own times. The linking of specific Muslim interpretations to an ideological basis, however, is still pertinent to understanding how political hegemony determines the validity of any one particular interpretation of Islam, and whether the historical acceptance of the diversity of communities of interpretation might not be a more important umbrella for understanding the worldwide *umma*. This may be particularly crucial at a time when historical diversity needs to be reconciled with the existence of a plurality of Muslim communities in the majority of the Muslim nation-states of today.

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