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Isma'ilism
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Reference

Abstract

This detailed article on Isma'ilism is a unique study into some of the key concepts governing Ismaili beliefs. The article starts off with a brief background of the Isma'ilis and some of the early major schisms in their history. It touches upon the da'wa activities and some of the challenging circumstances under which it operated. The early literature of the Isma'ilis is preserved in Arabic and then Persian languages. Some of the major works of the more prominent dai's such as Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani, al-Mu'ayyad fi'l-din Shirazi and Nasir Khusraw are discussed in some detail in the article.

Isma'ilism is a part of the Shi'ite branch of Islam whose adherents constitute at present a small minority within the wider Muslim *ummah.* They live in over twenty-five different countries, including Afghanistan, East Africa, India, Iran, Pakistan, Syria, Yemen, the United Kingdom, North America, and also parts of China and the Soviet Union.

Historical Background

Immamat

In common with Shi'ite Islam, Isma'ilism affirms that after the death of the Prophet Muhammad his cousin and son-in-law, 'Ali, became Imam, based on a specific designation made by the Prophet before his death. Such a leadership, it was believed, was to continue thereafter by heredity through 'Ali and his wife Fatimah, the Prophet's daughter. Succession to the Imamate, according to Shi'ite doctrine and tradition, was to be based on *nass* (designation) by the Imam of the time.

In the course of Shi'ite history, differences arose over the issue of succession to the position of Imam. The most significant in terms of the subsequent emergence of Shi'ite Isma`ilism followed the death of Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq in 148/765. The body of Shi'ites who continued to give allegiance to. the line of Imam Ja'far's descendants through his son Isma'il came to be

known as Isma'iliyyah; others who accepted a younger son Musa Kazim are known as Ithna 'ashariyyah.[1]

The Dawa

According to Isma'ili sources, the next four Imams, while maintaining anonymity to avoid persecution, were engaged in organising the Isma'ili movement, so that when it finally emerged into the public limelight in the third/ninth century, there existed a sophisticated political and doctrinal structure by which Isma'ilism was able to gain widespread support and political success. The organisation created by the Imams to undertake this work is known as the *da'wa* - a term based on the Quran (LXI, 7), signifying a call or an invitation to Islam. Although not unique to the Isma'ilis, the skilful organisation and the highly effective network of communications, and the intellectual and diplomatic accomplishments of its representatives - each of whom was called a *da'i* in the organisation - gave it a very special character within Isma'ilism.

Fatimid rule

During the period in which Isma'ilism was developing and spreading, the *da'wa* was often beset with problems of organisation and unity, which led to occasional defections over matters of policy and even doctrine. In spite of such setbacks and the adverse conditions under which the *da'wa* often operated, great success was achieved in parts of Iran, Yemen, and North Africa, which led in 297/910 to the proclamation of the Imam of the time as the Amir al-Mu'minin (commander of the faithful) with the title of *al-Mahdi (*the guide). This marked the opening phase of the Isma'ili attempt to give concrete shape to their vision of an Islamic society. The dynasty of the Imams, which ruled from North Africa and then Egypt for over two centuries, adopted the title al-Fatimiyyun (Fatimids) after Fatimah, the Prophet's daughter who was married to `Ali.[2]

During the period of Fatimid rule, the influence and extent of Isma'ilism grew considerably. The Fatimid Empire at its height exerted its influence far beyond Egypt to Palestine, Syria, the Hijaz, Yemen, Iran, Sind, and the Mediterranean. In 450/1058, the Fatimids also occupied Baghdad, the capital of their rivals the Abbasid dynasty, for a short period.

The Isma'ili *da'wa* played a very important role in maintaining ideological loyalty and support within this far-flung empire. It served also to create a unified doctrine and organisation to offset the differences that had beset the movement during its earlier stages. Its efforts at preaching Islam extended its influence into India and to the remoter regions of Central Asia.

Fatimid Achievements in Learning

It was in the sphere of intellectual and cultural life that Fatimid Isma'ili achievement seems most brilliant and outstanding. The Fatimid patronage of learning and its encouragement of scientific research and cultural activity made Cairo a renowned centre, attracting

mathematicians, physicians, astronomers, thinkers, and administrators of note from all over the Muslim world, particularly to its two great universities, al-Azhar and Dar al-Hikmah. These seats of learning also gave impetus to the development of legal, philosophical, and theological thinking among Isma'ili scholars, which provided the basis for a comprehensive articulation of Isma'ili thought and doctrine. The cultural and economic impact of Fatimid rule extended also into Europe, bridging the way for further development in the West of Muslim scientific achievements in fields such as optics, medicine, and astronomy.

The Druze Movement

The expansion of Fatimid influence and the efforts of the *da'wa* brought the Fatimids into conflict with existing rulers such as the Abbasids and later the Saljuqs. In addition, during this later phase, the empire was adversely affected by famines and internal disputes among various sections of the army. After the death of Imam al-Hakim in 411/1021, a group of Isma'ilis broke away from the *da'wa*, preferring to remain faithful to the memory of al-Hakim. Thus, they gave birth to what later came to be known as the Druze movement.

The Musta'li Branch

A much more serious rift occurred following the death of Imam al-Mustansir in 487/1094. In Iran and parts of Syria, the Isma'ilis supported his elder son and designated heir, Nizar, whereas in Egypt, Yemen, and Sind, Nizar's younger brother, al-Musta'li, was believed to have been designated as the new Imam by al-Mustansir on his deathbed. These two Isma'ili groups are called Nizari and Musta'li Isma'ilis respectively. Both groups shared a common Fatimid heritage, but their histories and development evolved in different directions. The division led to the subsequent dissolution of Fatimid rule in Egypt, but the continuing activity of the two groups was a vital factor in the survival and re-emergence of Isma'ili influence outside Egypt.

The Musta'li-Tayyibi Da'wa

Yemen had been one of the strongholds of the Fatimid Empire and a vigorous centre of the Isma'ili *da'wa*.[3] After al-Mustansir's death, the da'wa in Yemen supported al-Musta'li and, after him, his son and successor, al-Amir. With his death in 524/1130, there was a further division within the Musta'li branch of Isma'ilism. In Yemen, the *da'wa* supported the right of al-Amir's infant son, al-Tayyib, to be Imam, rejecting the claims of the uncle-regent `Abd al-Majid, who subsequently had himself proclaimed Imam. The latter's line did not last long, passing out of significance with the capture of Egypt by the Ayyubids. The supporters of al-Tayyib, meanwhile, came to believe that he was in a state of concealment *(sitr)* and that the Imams who succeeded al-Tayyib would henceforth live in such a state until the time of manifestation. In their absence the *da'wa's* affairs were entrusted to a chief *da'i*, called *da'i mutlaq*.

The centre of this group remained in Yemen for several centuries, establishing a vigorous state for a while, but, faced with hostility, it moved eventually to India, where the new headquarters came to be established in 947/1567. The community in Yemen dwindled in time, although followers of this branch of Isma'ilism - particularly of a subsequent offshoot of the Tayyibi *da'wa* known as the Sulaymanis, who give allegiance to a chief *da'i* residing in Yemen - are still to be found in certain regions of that land.

In India, the Tayyibi Isma'ilis continued to develop under a chief *da'i* and succeeded, sometimes under adverse conditions, in sustaining successfully their religious life and organisation. The majority there are called Da'udi, to distinguish them from the Sulaymani line and both groups are referred to also as *Bohora,* which denotes their occupation as traders and merchants. The chief *da'i* of the Da'udi group resides in Bombay; the community is concentrated in the provinces of Gujarat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, in most major cities of India and Pakistan, in East Africa, and lately in smaller numbers in Europe and North America.

The Nizari Isma'ili *Da'wa*

The history of the Nizari branch of Ismailism is marked by their adherence to the goals set by the Fatimids as well as by the emergence of newer goals and policies in the context of a changing and increasingly hostile environment.[4] Particularly in Iran, where Isma'ili influence had already been established under the Fatimids, the Nizari *da'wa* had to function in markedly changed circumstances, which were due not only to the severance of ties with Cairo but also to the presence of the powerful, militantly Sunni Turkish dynasty of the Seljuqs. In addition to the hostility prevailing in the political and military spheres, the *da'wa*, like its predecessor under the Fatimids, became the object of theological and intellectual attacks that often sought to portray it in a deliberately negative and distorted fashion. This often led to quite fantastic and legendary notions about their history and thought. Pejorative terms like "assassins," etc. still persist in popular writings, although serious scholarly work has led to considerable revision of this distorted view and greater understanding of their history and aspirations.

The focal point of the Nizari Isma'ili movement was the fortress of Alamut in the Alborz Mountains of northern Iran. This fortress, captured by the *da'i* Hasan-i Sabbah in 483/1090, now became the centre for a growing number of strongholds that were established through military and diplomatic means. In time, these centres became networks of Isma'ili settlements in Iran as well as in Syria, where a similar pattern of establishing strongholds in mountainous regions took place. Hasan-i Sabbah, according to Nizari tradition, acted as the representative of the Imam, organising the various settlements. This process of consolidation provided a basis for what was to become a Nizari Isma'ili! state that incorporated both Iranian and Syrian

strongholds and was ruled from Alamut by Isma'ili Imams, who assumed control after the initial period of establishment under representatives such as Hasan-i Sabbah. Although under constant pressure from the Seljuqs, the state had a thriving existence for over 150 years. However, confrontation with the expanding Mongol power led to the downfall of the state, the demolition of its principal strongholds, and a general and widespread massacre of Ismailis.

The history of the Nizari Ismailis following the destruction of their state and the dispersal of their leaders in Iran and elsewhere is little known. In Syria, as in Iran, they continued to survive despite persecution. Often in Iran their organisation resembled that of the Sufi *tariqahs* (orders), which by now had established themselves all over the Muslim world. The Nizari sources speak of an uninterrupted succession of Imams in different parts of Iran and, in the ninth/fifteenth century, of an emergence of new activity on the part of the *da'wa* which led to a further growth of Nizari Isma'ilism in parts of India and Central Asia, to which the Imam in Iran remained linked through the activities of the *da'*is. In general, however, the various communities of Nizari Isma'ilis in Iran, Syria, Central Asia, and India remained relatively isolated and self-protective for several centuries, mindful of the constant threat of persecution.

In the thirteenth/nineteenth century, the Imam of the time, Hasan 'Ali Shah, called the Aga Khan, migrated to India from Iran. In the twentieth century, under the leadership of the last two Imams, Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah, Aga Khan III (1294/1877-1377/1957), and Shah Karim al-Husaym, Aga Khan IV (b. 1936), both of whom have played a major leadership role in Muslim as well as international affairs, the Nizari Isma'ilis have effected a successful transition to the modern period in many parts of the world. This reorganisation has encompassed developments in various spheres of education, health, economic and cultural life and has been linked wherever possible to national goals and in recent times on a more global scale to creating a greater self-consciousness among Isma'ilis as well as other Muslims of the role their Islamic heritage can play in modern life.

The Heritage and Its Themes

Ismailis have been designated by several names in the past. By those who were hostile to them and regarded their vision of Islam as heretical, they have been accused of heresy and extremism, of being exclusively *bataniyyah* (esotericists), and of having several legends fabricated about them and their teachings. Those heresiographers who sought significance in the sequence of imams with its attendant numerology used the designation *sab'iyya,* "seveners," since the number seven was significant in the elaboration of Isma'ili sacred history. Since early Western scholarship of Isma'ilism depended primarily on non-Isma'ili sources, it inherited the biases already present in such accounts. Isma'ili writers, for instance, used terms such as *al-da'wat al-hadiyah* (the rightly-guided *da'wa)* in referring to their move-

ment, so that strictly speaking the term *Isma`iliyyah* and its variants originated with, and were to be found primarily in the work of, polemicists and heresiologists. Recent scholarship, based on a more judicious analysis of such sources and on Isma'ili materials as they become more readily available, provides a considerably revised and more balanced picture.

The languages of Isma'ili Literature

Early Ismaili works are mostly in Arabic; Nasir-i Khusraw was the only Fatimid writer who wrote in Persian. The Arabic tradition was continued in Yemen and in India by the Musta'lis, and in Syria by the Nizaris. In Iran, the literature is in Persian, which for the Nizari Isma'ilis there, as in Central Asia, became the significant language. In India, the *da'is* developed a traditional literature called *ginan* (knowledge) using the vernacular languages such as Sindhi and Gujarati. In the northern area of modern Pakistan, the Isma'ilis of Hunza, Gilgit, and Chitral have also preserved and continue to evolve a literature based on what have been hitherto oral languages such as Burushaski, Shina, and Khowar, although the Arabic-Urdu script is being increasingly used at present.[5]

Thus, there is considerable diversity of thought and development represented in the literature, much of which still remains to be properly edited - let alone carefully studied. The following exposition of Isma'ili doctrine and spirituality can be regarded as a heritage shared in general by all Isma'ilis in the context of their effort to relate questions of authority and organisation in the *ummah* to an understanding of the inner core of the Islamic message and the values contained in that message.

Principal features of Ismaili thought

A very significant feature of Isma'ili thought is the comprehensiveness of its scope and a specificity with regard to its method. It shares with other schools of Islam the ideal of understanding and implementing Islam in its totality in order that the *ummah* might be governed by Divine Will rather than human caprice. In common with the other Shi'ites, Isma'ilis maintained that it was through the agency of a divinely guided Imam descended from 'Ali that such an ideal could be realised. The doctrine of the Imam, therefore, occupied a central place in Shi'ism, and obedience and devotion to him were considered the principal indices of acceptance of the Divine Message of Islam. This principle received a central and specific emphasis in Isma'ilism, because it was through the Imam that a true understanding of Islam was obtained and in obeying him the duties of a true believer were fulfilled. Such a view did not rule out the use of the rational or intellectual faculty on the part of the believer. In fact, true understanding came to be defined as the ultimate unfolding of human reason (*'aql*) to its fullest potential under the guidance of the Imam. It is the working out of this process that provides the key to understanding the heart of Isma'ili spirituality as exemplified in their literature and in their concepts of learning and knowledge.

The curriculum in Fatimid seats of learning led an individual through progressive and disciplined study of a wide variety of sciences. The student commenced study with the aim of

mastering *al-`ibadat al-'amaliyyah* (practical worship), the sciences necessary to grasp and define the *Shari'ah* in terms of the pillars of faith, a *Shari'ah* which shared a number of essential characteristics with those of other Muslim legal schools. After mastering these subjects, the student then proceeded to a study of *al-`ibaddt al- `ilmiyyah* (intellectual worship), the sciences that expound and interpret the levels of meaning reflected in the pillars.

Ta'wil and Tanzil

This methodology in Ismaili thought is best brought out by Nasir-i Khusraw's explanation of the nature of Revelation and, by inference, religion. There are two aspects of Revelation *tanzil* (Revelation) and *ta'wil* (hermeneutic interpretation), which are reflected in the *Haqiqah* and the *Shari'ah,* the latter being like a symbol of the *Haqiqah* (truth).[6] *Tanzil* thus defines the letter of the Revelation embodied in the coming down of the values of the *Shari'ah,* and *ta'wil* is the hermeneutical analysis of the letter leading to the original meaning. Jean Pepin, in analyzing the original Greek word *hermeneuein* states:

As used generally the word has come to signify "interpretation" and that hermeneutics today commonly has as its synonym "exegesis." However, the original meaning of *hermeneuein* and of related words - or in any case their principal meaning - was not that at all, and was not far from being its exact contrary, if we grant that exegesis is a movement of penetration into the intention of a text or message.[7]

In context above, the Arabic sense of *ta'wil*, to go back to the first or original meaning, can be said to designate a similar interpretive function. The goal of *ta'wil* in Isma'ili thought is to enable the believer to penetrate beyond the formal, literal meaning of the text and to create a sense of certitude regarding the ultimate relevance and meaning of a given passage in the Quran. All interpretation in Ismaili thought assumes such an exegetical basis, leading by way of levels of meaning to the ultimate truths expressed as the concept of *Haqaqah.* The validity of the literal *(zahir)* is not denied, but it is only one aspect of an overall meaning that also has an inner dimension *(batin).* When applied to the study of the Quran, Islam, and religion, it led to the rise of two differing but complementary genres of literature among the Isma'ilis - *haqa'iq* literature*,* which contains the esoteric tradition, and other forms of writing that are expository and whose subject matter related to Law, governance, and history.

The milieu within which Isma'ili thought flourished and developed had already been characterised by the steady integration of philosophical and analytical tools assimilated through translations from the Greek tradition, as well as influences transmitted through Persia and India. Isma'ili thought represents a self-conscious attempt to harmonise elements from these traditions that were considered compatible with its own understanding of Quranic wisdom. Nasir-i Khusraw calls this *jami' al-hikmatayn,* "synthesis of the two wisdoms,"[8] the title of one of his works, in which he seeks to harmonise the esoteric understanding of Islam with the wisdom of the ancients. In doing this he was following the fundamental Quranic notion of the universality of Revelation and the Islamic affirmation that God had vouchsafed the truth to others in the past. The synthesis, however, was not an indiscriminate one, and it

has also been argued that in addition to Neoplatonism, early Isma'ili sources also reflect influences from Gnostic elements in the milieu.[9]

Unity and the Cosmos

The Principle of Double Negation

Tawhid is the most fundamental concept of Islam. Its interpretation and exegesis by Isma'ili thinkers demonstrate the operation of the Isma'ili science of hermeneutics. One of the points of contention among early Muslim theologians had to do with an explanation of the Quranic verses concerning the Attributes of God, particularly where such Attributes reflected human associations such as sitting, hearing, speaking, etc. For the Isma'ili thinker, this controversy highlighted one of the problems he came to be concerned with in understanding and explicating through *ta'wil* the seeming contradiction in these verses. Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani (d. 360/971) and Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani (c. 411/1021), two well-known thinkers of the Fatimid period, established as their goal an interpretation that was free of the two errors they attributed to other theologians.[10] The first is *tashbih* (anthropomorphism, i.e., trying to understand God by comparison or analogy); the second is *ta'til* (i.e., denying *tashbih* and thereby deleting from the description of God all Attributes). Their concern was not to establish through rational means the existence of God, since rational proof of that which is beyond the capacity of rational understanding would represent a futile exercise in itself, but rather, according to Sijistani, to understand God as He deserves to be understood, so as to accord Him the true worship that is due to Him alone. Kirmani's exegesis occurs in his classic work *Rahat al-'aql (Balm for the Intellect).* The title of the work itself indicates the essentially spiritual goal of the intellectual exercise - a sense of contentment and satisfaction that comes to the human mind in its proper interaction with Revelation, rather than mere vindication of the power of the rational faculty as over against Revelation. It is this attitude that caused Isma'ili writers to oppose the views of Rhazes (Abu Bakr Muhammad Zakariyya' Razi), particularly where the latter raises questions about the validity of the mission of the prophets and, by inference, the validity of a religious world view.

The *ta'wil* applied to the Quranic verses regarding God leads in both writers to a process of dissociating all humanlike qualities from God. This is considered to be the first step; both writers recognise that such a position could, in fact, lead to an accusation that they too had committed *ta'til,* leaving them open to a charge of "hidden anthropomorphism." The step that must now be taken is that having denied that God cannot be described, located, defined, limited, etc., *one must negate the previous negation.* The absolute transcendence of God is established by the use of double negation, in which a negative and a negative of a negative are applied to the thing denied - the first freeing the idea of God from all association with the material and the second removing Him from any association with the nonmaterial. God is thus neither within the sensible world nor within the extra-sensible. The process of *ta'wil* here begins with an affirmation of what God is not, then a denial of that affirmation, thereby deleting both the affirmation and the denial. Such a process of double negation offers the only means whereby one can use the available language without fully accepting its premises. In the

above discourse, the resources of language, that is, the letter of the Revelation, establish a starting point, and ta'wil reveals how language itself is unable to express fully the reality inherent in the concept. Such a mode of defining the transcendence of God, in the Isma'ili view, is an act of cognisance of God-indeed, an act of worship in itself.

Divine Order

This principle of unity is also reflected in Isma'ili cosmological principles. In elaborating this cosmology, the writers adapted elements of the Neoplatonic schema of emanation, but not without establishing an Islamic context for the adaptation. At the heart of the cosmology is the principle of order, a harmonious totality. The various components of the cosmic structure were also regarded as constituting a hierarchical structure. The planets and the abstract principles that governed them were ranked one above the other, just as the prophets, the Imams, and the officials of the *da'wa,* and members of the community formed a hierarchy with clearly defined status.

God transcended the order and unlike in Neoplatonism, where the One brings forth by emanation the Universal Intellect, in Isma'ili cosmology, Allah creates by a timeless and transcendent command *(amr)*. The process is defined as *ibda'*, origination, which is an all-encompassing, timeless, creative act. Thus, all of creation is directly related to God in its origin, but manifested through a subsequent process of unfolding from the Universal Intellect, which is the First Originated Being. God is *badi`* (Originator), as described in the Quranic verse-the Originator of the heavens and the earth (II, 117). The Quranic terminology of *Qalam* (pen), *'Arsh* (throne), and *qada'* (decree) are also equated with the Universal Intellect as the prelude to a framework for what is called *'alam al-i'* (the Universe of Origination) in a hierarchical series. This level is then made to correspond to the *alam al-din* (the Universe of Religion), in order to provide a framework in religious life represented by a hierarchy of faith *(hudud al-din),* which in turn corresponds to the various cosmic principles. The highest in this hierarchy constituting the first three intelligences were identified with the Prophet, his *wasi* (heir), 'Ali, and the succeeding Imams respectively. This order was expounded in systems first elaborated in detail by al-Nasafi (d. 331/943*)* and subsequently refined in the works of Sijistani, Kirmani, and Nasir-i Khusraw. The exact hierarchy of the various intellects and the terminology employed tend to differ in the various authors' works, but the fundamental principle of the absolute transcendence of God, the general order of the cosmic principles and underlying hierarchical notions are retained.

The architecture of the Isma'ili cosmos, while affirming a strong sense of unity, is also the sacred canopy within which its religious conceptions unfold. Thus, cosmology, metaphysics, and religion are closely interlinked, where each element in the hierarchical universe mirrors the other, establishing a chain of being, making the cosmos intelligible and meaningful and at the same time rooting the religious life on earth to a dynamic cosmos, operating under divine command.

Sacred History and Human Destiny

In the view of the cosmos described above, history unfolds as a "sacred" series of events imbued with Divine Purpose. This unfolding is seen in cyclical terms based on the *ta'wil* of creation in the following Quranic verse:

> God who created the heavens and the earth in six days *(*VII, 54*).*

Al-Mu'ayyad fi'l-din Sh-irazi (d. 470/1077) in his interpretation of the verse starts by demonstrating that the reference to days bears no relation to the conception of a day measured with the rising and setting of the sun.[11] Since there was no sun before creation, it would be absurd, he argues, to suppose such a measure of time in relation to God's creative power. He then refers to other Quranic references where God is said to create faster than the twinkling of an eye, and he concludes that the references to heaven and earth have in reality nothing to do with the heaven, earth, and days as conceived in terms of man's measure of space and time. The true *ta'wil* of the verse reveals a sacred history, connoting the six cycles of prophecy, each an event of cosmic significance. The prophets and the time-cycles they represent are Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and the Prophet Muhammad.

Each prophetic mission inaugurates a *Shari'ah,* a revealed pattern of life to ensure that society accords with the Divine Will. Each prophet, however, is succeeded by the *wasi,* who, while preserving and consolidating the *Shari'ah,* also has the role of interpreting and communicating the inner meaning of the Revelation and the legal prescriptions. The completion of the sixth cycle also marks the onset of a seventh era, in which the Imam assumes his role and thereby completes a process referred to in the Quran's climactic verse:

Today I have perfected your religion for you, and I have completed My blessing upon you, and I have approved Islam for your religion. *(*V, 4*)*

This fulfills the goals embodied in the missions of the six prophets, which like the "six days" do not originate to oppose one another, but rather to succeed one another. Such an interpretation of creation carries with it a sense of the sacredness of history, where the most significant occurrences turn on the prophetic missions and their fulfilment, which leads ultimately to the salvation of humankind. Time, in this sacred framework, returns to its source, and the whole "movement" finally culminates in the Quranic *qiyamah,* the Great Resurrection, a resurrection of all souls to the esoteric garden of pre-eternal times.

The Ten Intellects

This cyclical concept of history is in turn linked to the notion of human destiny and is best illustrated in the interpretation of the Quranic account of the fall of Adam. This drama in heaven, as explicated in the writing of al-Hamidi (d. 595/1199) and others,[12] regards the story of Adam in the garden, his temptation by Satan and his subsequent

fall, as having taken place on a cosmic plane, in the pre-existing nonmaterial world of *`alam al-ibda'*. Adam, the human being, is called Adam *ruhani,* spiritual Adam. Using the cosmological system of the ten intellects already expounded by Kirmani, this account represents Adam as having originally the status of the third intellect in rank. The good aspect of the "tree" in the "garden" which he was forbidden to approach is the status of the first universal intellect. Iblis, who is Satan, is the representation of Adam's own desire not to accept the status accorded to him. This caused him to commit the sin of wrongful ambition, of desiring to attain equality of rank with those above. The subsequent punishment and expulsion from the garden mark the loss of both his rank and his pre-eminence over other intellects below him. He becomes the tenth intellect, but seeks through repentance to regain his original status. It is by returning through the intellects above him that Adam, now in the sense that he symbolises humankind, reverts to his original status. It is also for this reason that the Universe of Intellects has as its counterpart on the earth the hierarchy of faith. Collectively this hierarchy represents the *da'wa,* the call, returning the fallen to the true path and representing a step in the process of "ascent." The fall is not the prelude to the idea of "original sin," but rather the characterisation of the cosmic process in which the cycles of prophecy and their subsequent consummation restore the true order of things. The role of the hierarchy is to designate for Adam, as for all humankind, the path that must be traversed, the steps they must ascend, in order to reach the Universal Intellect. Such a return represents the potential goal that each human being can attain and through which comes the proper recognition of God's Unity and the wisdom of the creative process. The return is to that state wherein Adam was endowed with knowledge that constituted an awareness of what the Quran calls "the names, all of them" (II, 31), which in Isma'ili thought are no less than the *haqa'iq,* the universal truths.

Ritual Action, Cosmic Meaning

The *Da'a'im al-islam* of al-Qadi al-Nu'man preserves a definition of faith *(iman)* given by Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq in response to a question regarding an issue of some significance among early Muslim theologians: "Tell me about faith," he is asked, "is it profession *witb* action or profession *witbout* action?" The Imam answers:

Faith consists entirely in action, and profession is part of action. Action is made obligatory by God, and is clear from His Book .... Faith possesses circumstances, stages, grades and stations. In faith, there can be total perfection; or else it may be imperfect . . . ."[13]

This notion of faith, which establishes action as an integral part of spiritual development and perfection, is the basis for the hermeneutics of ritual in Isma'ilism and for the interplay of the ideas of *zahir* and *batin,* which in this context can refer to ritual action and its inner universal meaning. These perfect the human capacity to act and to develop awareness of the meaning of that action on a cosmic scale. The *Da'a'im is* a work defining the sphere of ritual action, the *Shari'ah,* and al-Qadi al-Nu`man also went on to write *Ta'il al-da `a'im,*

which defines the sphere of inner meaning related to ritual action. The discourse between the two spheres is best illustrated in the hermeneutics of the daily prayer *(salat)* in Islam.[14]

Ta'wil of Salat

In defining the *ta'wil* of *salat,* al-Nu'man states that it symbolises *da'wa,* not in the limited sense of the institution under the Fatimids, which carried on the tasks of studying and preaching Isma'ili doctrine, but in the wider sense of a call or summoning to the Prophet's message and its continuing affirmation by the Imam of the time. *Salat* then stands for Islam, to which the Prophet and the Imams after him call humankind.

Specifically, he begins with the *ta'wil* of the times for ritual prayer, based on references to the Quran *(*II, 238; XVII, 78-79; etc.). The established prayers during each day signify the great epochs of the Shari*'ah* initiated by the five great prophets who came after Adam - Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad.

Nasir-i Khusraw also attempts to elaborate the *ta'wil* of the three stages of time he identifies within the ritual of prayer itself - the beginning, the middle, and the end. The beginning stage symbolises the *natiq,* the Isma'ili term for the Prophet as the promulgator of Revelation; the middle stage stands for *asas,* the interpreter of the inner meaning of Revelation; and the final stage stands for the *qa'im al-qiydmah,* in which both the outer and the inner are fused and transcended. Such a cyclical view of history is an important aspect of Ismaili thought and illustrates the dual dimension of time that Isma'ili writers saw reflected in the Quran. The first dimension provided a body of rituals and doctrines for a historical community; the second transposed these rituals and doctrines to a level of meaning beyond the historical constraints of time, where this *tanzil* was metamorphosed by *ta'wil* to provide the individual Muslim an opportunity to grasp the root cosmic meaning of the revealed Law.

Before discussing specifically the performance of the ritual prayer itself, al-Nu'man makes an interesting reference to the *qiblah,* the point of orientation for prayer, taking as his reference the verse "so set thy face to *al-din* (the religion) *hanifa'* (as a primordial monotheist)" (XXX, 30). He points out that at one level this is the point of orientation to which *hunafa'* (primordial monotheists) like Ibrahim and Adam set themselves - the Ka'bah (or even perhaps Jerusalem). In its esoteric sense, the verse refers to the *wasi,* the Prophet's successor, through whom the Prophet turns his face to the community and through whom the *batin* of religion is affirmed during the Prophet's own lifetime and the *zahir* established to serve as a point of continuity after his death.

The discussion then proceeds to the steps incorporated within prayer itself. These according to Nasir-i Khusraw are seven: (1) *takbir,* which symbolises the taking of the covenant from a *mu'min.* During *takbir,* the believers are required to be silent and to concentrate their attention fully on the performance of prayer - in the same way that a *mu'min* from whom the covenant has been taken should not manifest his quest for the *batin* openly lest his intentions be

misconstrued and his words misunderstood. *(2) Qiyam,* standing, which symbolises the firm affirmation of the *mu'min* to stand by his covenant and not be swayed from it. (3) Recitation of the *Fatihah* and an additional sura, which symbolises communication with the rest of the community, conveying to them the meaning of faith and elaborating it for them. (4) *Ruku',* bowing, which symbolises the recognition of the *asas* and during his absence the *hujjah,* who is the evidence for his existence. (5) *Sujud,* prostration, which symbolises the recognition of the *natiq* as the heralder of a "great cycle" and the Imam of that cycle. (6) *Tashahhud,* which symbolises the recognition of the *da'i. (7)* The offering of *salam* marks the giving of permission to manifest in conversation and action one's faith, just as after the offering of *salam* in ritual prayer one is permitted to converse.

When the worshiper completes the performance of *salat* in *zabir,* he has correspondingly sought to fulfil his inner quest, which involves a recognition of the inner meaning of the steps. In essence, then, the *ta'wil* of the steps within *salat* is that they are stages in the journey of the individual soul in its quest for the inner realities of the Faith.

The essence of such an interpretation of prayer is summed up thus by Nasir-i Khusraw:

The exoteric *(zahir) of* Prayer consists in adoring God with postures of the body, in directing the body towards the *qibla* of the body, which is the *Ka'bah,* the Temple of the Most High God, situated at Mekka. To understand the esoteric *of* Prayer *(ta'wil-e-batin)* means adoring God with the thinking soul and turning towards the quest of the gnosis of the Book and the gnosis of positive religion, towards the *qibla of* the spirit which is the Temple of God, that Temple in which the divine gnosis is enclosed, I mean the Imam in Truth, salutations to him.[15]

One result of studying these examples of *ta'wil is* a recognition of the dialectic that underlies the hermeneutics. As the *ta'wil* unfolds, it moves always from the level of the specific and temporal to that of the cosmic and eternal. *Ta'wil is* historically rooted in the community and in tradition; it builds and shapes itself until the individual experiences it as part of his intellectual and spiritual growth. In Islam, according to these writings, the performance of prayer ought to involve each Muslim in a constant dialogue with the meaning of life and the cosmos, an idea that is at the heart of Isma'ili doctrine. Another result of this study is the recognition that the *batin* of *salat,* what Nasir-i Khusraw calls the "adoration with the thinking soul," complements the *zahir,* so that in the outward performance of the act of prayer one is simultaneously involving the intellectual and spiritual faculties.

Themes of Quest and Transformation

Among the accounts of the activity of Isma'ili *da'is,* there occurs a type of narrative, a description almost "mythical" in form, which describes key moments in the birth and development of an inner consciousness, revealing at the level of personal and spiritual life the themes of quest and transformation. The idea of the quest is at the heart of the notion of *ta'wil,*

for by this tool of comprehension one begins the search for inner meaning. Simultaneously, as is evident in the analysis of prayer, the quest becomes the prelude for a transformation, which makes possible the acquisition of this knowledge of inner meaning as one ascends the steps of the hierarchy of faith. Besides an autobiographical *Ode* written by Nasir-i Khusraw, there are in Isma'ili literature works such as the *Kitab al-'alim wa'l-ghulam,*[16] and accounts preserved in the tradition of the *ginans* among the Nizari Isma'ilis of the subcontinent[17] which contain such narratives, symbolic of the two themes. The art of narratives lies in the way in which the motifs of seeking, initiation, and transformation are evoked and woven together so that the tapestry that emerges in each case reflects a common design and pattern, even though the "action" of the narrative is set in differing contexts.

The autobiographical account of Nasir-i Khusraw's conversion to Isma'ilism refers to a dream that jars him from what has hitherto been a life of sloth, and he subsequently undertakes a pilgrimage to Mecca. On the way, he encounters and is converted to Isma'ilism, and he is subsequently invested with the important role of preaching as a key member of the Fatimid *da'wa*. It is, however, in an ode celebrating this conversion that the pattern of *ta'wil* woven into the narrative is made apparent. His sleep becomes the equivalent of the state of ignorance; the figure in the dream is the catalyst who causes the act of awakening leading to the quest; and the subsequent resolution is symbolised in the arrival at the *balad al-amin* (Quran XCV, 31), the Cairo of the narrative, but in reality the secure abode of true understanding, which is the goal of the quest. The transformation is consummated through the act of commitment, the taking of the oath of allegiance to the Imam, the symbolism of which is evoked in the Quran (XLVIII, 18).[18]

In the *Kitab al-'alim wa'l-ghulam,* the protagonist Abu Malik is a type of spiritual exile who, as part of his mission, has left his home. He enters a town incognito and mingles with the crowd before encountering a disciple. The narrative then unfolds in a series of dialogues, so that the process of pedagogy in Ismailism becomes evident. This process is a threefold one. Initially, the disciple's sense of quest is aroused; he is sensitised to the meaning of symbols, the use of *ta'wil,* which leads from the letter to the spirit. His desire for knowledge having now awakened, the disciple is eager to know more about the figure in whose hands are placed the keys to inner meaning and to the spiritual heaven, namely, the Imam. In a further stage, he acquires a new name, symbolising his entry into a new pattern of understanding and way of life and, in a final stage, the act of transformation is marked in a ceremony. What transpires at this ceremony remains unrecorded. The text does not reveal the secret; it has only been communicated personally to the disciple.

In the narratives recorded in the *ginan* literature, the description of the activities of the Isma'ili *da'is*, also called *pirs,* reflect a sequence of action with certain interactive features, such as the following: (1) the anonymous arrival at a well-known centre of religious activity; (2) the performance of miracles and the winning over of a disciple or disciples; (3) a period of confrontation and even rejection; (4) eventual triumph and mass conversion; (5) departure.

The literal testimony of these narratives is, as in the last two cases, but a mirror of the original prototype in which the disciples pass through an initiatory process. A key set of images is that of the "raw" and the "cooked," where the disciple, a princess in one case, has taken a vow to daily taste cooked meat until the secret of who her bridegroom is to be is revealed to her. The day that the *pir* is in the vicinity, her gamekeeper, unable to find a deer to hunt for her meat, encounters the animals of the jungle around the *pir*, mesmerised by the playing of his song. Through a miracle, the *pir* gives a piece of the deer's meat to the gamekeeper. When the princess cooks and tastes it, she, as if awakened, recognises the nearness of her bridegroom's presence and seeks him out. In time a marriage takes place, bringing the metaphor of the bride and groom and their marriage, marking the transition from quest to transformation, to union.

Although all the narratives vary in context and in the setting of their action, they project identical themes, wherein the events lead through a quest to a transformation, at the heart of which lies the knowledge of universals. The image that best exemplifies this act of cognition and illumination is the Quranic symbol of divine radiant light, *nur (XXIV,* 35).
H. Corbin has attempted to illustrate the image of the Imam as *nur* (light) in the works of the Fatimid and post-Fatimid period to elucidate the essential elements of what he calls "the little known and scarcely studied form of Shi`ite Ismaili Gnosis,"[19] where reference is made to the complex image of the pillar of light *(haykal nurani),* by whose power the members of the hierarchy of faith are raised upward until they are all gathered together in the *qiyamah.* The later period of Isma'ilism reflects features that are analogous in some respects to Sufi theosophy, this similarity being a result of common contexts and mutual influence. The language of devotion is one aspect where the influence is apparent - in particular, where the element of religious experience seeks to illuminate the apprehension by the intellect and the soul of the *Haqiqah.* It is poetry rather than prose that captures best these moments of contemplation and acts of awakening. This mode of expression is already present in the *qasidah* of Nasir-i-Khusraw and is echoed also in the *ginans,* as the examples below show. One is a description of Nasir's initiation and transformation, and the other evokes the moments of bliss and illumination in the *ginans,* which can be described only in terms of a "spiritual concert."

> That sage set his hand upon his heart
> (a hundred blessings be on that hand and breast!)
> and said, "I offer you the remedy
> of proof and demonstration; but if you
> accept, I shall place a seal upon your lips
> which must never be broken." I gave my consent and he
> affixed the seal. Drop by drop and day by day
> he fed me the healing potion, till
> my ailment disappeared, my tongue became
> imbued with eloquent speech; my face, which had
> been pale as saffron now grew rosy with joy;
> I who had been as stone was now a ruby;
> I had been dust - now I was ambergris.

He put my hand into the Prophet's hand,
I spoke the Oath beneath the exalted Tree
so heavy with fruit, so sweet with cooling shade.

 Have you ever heard of a sea which flows from fire?
 Have you ever seen a fox become a lion?
 The sun can transmute a pebble, which even the hand
of Nature can never change, into a gem.
I am that precious stone, my Sun is he
by whose rays this tenebrous world is filled with light.
In jealousy I cannot speak his name
in this poem, but can only say that for him
Plato himself would become a slave. He
is the teacher, healer of souls, favoured of God,
image of wisdom, fountain of knowledge and Truth.
Blessed the ship with him for its anchor,
blessed the city whose sacred gate he ever guards!
O Countenance of Knowledge, Virtue's Form,
Heart of Wisdom, Goal of Humankind,
O Pride of Pride; I stood before thee, pale
and skeletal, clad in a woollen cloak,
and kissed thine hand as if it were the grave
of the Prophet or Black Stone of the Kaaba.
Six years I served thee; and now, wherever I am
so long as I live I'll use my pen and ink,
my inkwell and my paper . . . in praise of thee![20]

When the unrecited name makes its abode in the interior
it becomes a lamp which illumines the heart;
the glories of true contemplation are felt within
The world's tinsel can no longer dazzle.

The flame lit by recitation
swallows all remembrance and devotion.
Truth hovers on the Master's lip
Because - as he says - "I am always on its side."

The world is dazed by brightness
and turns away from the blazing glare.
If you were to reveal the mystery of this radiance
the world would brand you a fool.

"In the heart, I make my seat," says the Master
"all seventy-two chambers ring with music,

the dark of night is dispelled
and the concert of *ginans* begins."

The unrecited name plays on and on:
a symphony is heard within.
The seventy-two chambers fill with music, though
its essence is perceived by only a few .[21]

Cosmos and History

Isma'ili spirituality is ultimately rooted in two essentially Islamic themes - a cosmos-mirroring "Unity" and a sacred history reflecting the working out of Divine Will and human destiny. These themes as illustrated in the literature reveal a pattern in Isma'ili thought where human life is an exalted destiny whose movement in its highest stage mirrors a return to its origin, as in the following Quranic verse: "From Him we are and to Him we return" (II, 156).

However, this goal has as its context the material world, where matter and spirit exist in a state of complementarity. The *zahir* which defines the world of matter is the arena in which the context for a spiritual life is shaped. The essence of Isma'ili thought shows no propensity for rejecting this material world; in fact, without action in it, the spiritual quest is regarded as unworthy. It is in this juxtaposition of *zahir* with *batin,* of the material with the spiritual, that the world of the believer comes to be invested with full meaning. Such is the continuing heritage that daily inspires Isma'ili life and is summed up in its most universal aspect, in the words that conclude a memorable passage in the *Memoirs* of the forty-eighth Nizari Isma'ili Imam, Shah Sultan Muhammad Shah, Agha Khan III:

Life in the ultimate analysis has taught me one enduring lesson. The subject should always disappear in the object. In our ordinary affections one for another, in our daily work with hand and brain, we most of us discover soon enough that any lasting satisfaction, any contentment that we can achieve, is the result of forgetting self, of merging subject with object, in a harmony that is of body, mind and spirit. And in the highest realms of consciousness all who believe in a Higher Being are liberated from all the clogging and hampering bonds of the subjective self in prayer, in rapt meditation upon and in the face of the glorious radiance of eternity, in which all temporal and earthly consciousness is swallowed up and itself becomes the eternal.[22]

Notes:

[1] General summations of Isma'ili history and more detailed references to specialised works will be found in the following: *Encyclopaedia of Islam,* s.v. "Isma`iliyya" (by *W.* Madelung); *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam,* s.v. "Isma'iliyya" (by W. Ivanow); Aziz Esmail and Azim Nanji, "The Isma'ilis in History," in *Isma'ili Contributions to Islamic Culture,* ed. S. H. Nasr (Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, *1977) 225-65; S.* Stern, *Studies in Early Isma'ilism (Tel* Aviv: Magnes Press, *1983).*

[2] For the Fatimids see *Encyclopaedia of Islam* s.v. "Fatimids" (by M. Canard); see also Abbas Hamdani, *The Fatimids* (Karachi: Pakistan Publishing House, *1962).*

[3] For an overview of the early period, see S. M. Stern, "The Succession to al-Amir, the claims of the later Fatimids to the imamate and the rise of Tayyibi Isma'ilism," *Oriens* 4 (1951) 193-255; and *Encyclopaedia of Islam,* s.v. "Bohoras" (by A. A. Fyzee).

[4] The most thoroughly researched study on the Niz'ari Isma`ili movement is M. G. S. Hodgson, *The Order of Assassins* (The Hague: Mouton, 1955). A summary of this work appears in Hodgson, "The Isma'ili State" in *The Cambridge History of Iran,* Vol. 5, ed. I. A. Boyle (Cambridge: University Press. 1968) 422-82.

[5] The most comprehensive survey of Isma'ili literature is I. K. Poonawala, *Biobibliography of Isma'ili Literature* (Malibu, CA: Undena, 1977).

[6] Translated from the quotation in H. Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964) 17.

[7] Quoted by Eugene Vance, "Pas de trois: Narrative, Hermeneutics and Structure in Medieval Poetics, in *Interpretation of Narrative,* ed. M. J. Valdes and Owen Miller (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978) 122.

[8] Nasir-i Khusraw, *Kitab Jami` al-Hikmatayn,* edited with a preliminary study in French and Persian by H. Corbin and M. Moin (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1953).

[9] See Heinz Halm, *Kosmologie und Heilslehre der fruhen Isma'iliya: Eine Studie zur islamischen Gnosis* Weisbaden: F. Steiner, 1978)

[10] The analysis is drawn from Azim Nanji, "Shi`i Isma'i1i Interpretation of the Qur'an," in *Selected Proceedings of the International Congress for the Study of the Qur'an, Australian National University*, 8-13 May 1980 (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1982) 40-42. For the cosmology, see Halm, *Kosmologie;* and W. Madelung, "Aspects of Isma'i1i Theology: The Prophetic Chain and the God beyond Being," in *Isma'ili Contributions,* 51-65.

[11] A. Nanji, "Shi'I Isma'ili Interpretation," 43-46

[12] Reference to the account is made by W. Madelung, "Isma'iliyya," 204; see also B. Lewis, "An Isma'ili Interpretation of the Fall of Adam," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 9 (1938) 691-704.

[13] *The Book of Faith from the Da'a'im al-Islam of al-Qadi al-Nu'man*, trans. A. A. A. Fyzee (Bombay: Nachiketa Publications, 1974) 6. A complete translation is to be published soon by the Institute of Isma'ili Studies in London.

[14] See A. Nanji, "Shi'i Isma'ili Interpretation," 43-46.

[15] Quoted by H. Corbin, "Nasir-i-Khusraw and Iranian Isma'ilism," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 4, ed. R. N. Frye (Cambridge: University Press, 1975) 523.

[16] For a description and analysis see H. Corbin, "Un roman initiatique du Xe siècle," in *Cahiers de civilisation médievale* 15 (April-June 1972) 1-25, 121-42.

[17] For the literature and its background, see Azim Nanji, *The Nizari Isma'ili Tradition in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent* (New York: Caravan Books, 1978). The theme of transformation is dealt with on pp. 101-10.

[18] For his "conversion" and contribution to Isma'ili esoterics, see Corbin, "Nasir-iKhusraw"; for his works, see Poonawala, *Isma'ili Literature,* 111-24. The relevant portion of the *qasidah has* been translated in *Nasir-i-Khusraw Forty Poems from the Divan,* trans. P. L. Wilson and G. R. Aavani (Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1977) 4-9.

[19] H. Corbin, "Divine Epiphany and Spiritual Birth in Isma'ilism Gnosis, in *Papers from Eranos Yearbooks* (Bollingen Series 30; New York: Pantheon Books, 1964) 5:71. Here, as elsewhere in this article, Corbin's contribution and influence in the interpretation of Isma'ili spirituality will be very evident. Some of his articles are to be made available in English translation in the near future; also H. Corbin*, Cyclical Time and Isma'ili Gnosis* (London: Kegan Paul International/Islamic Publications, 1983).

[20] Nasir-i-Khusraw*, Forty Poems from the Divan,* 8-9.

[21] The translation is part of a project on the *ginans* supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and is from a series of compositions entitled *Śloka.*

[22] Sultan Muhammad Shah, Agha Khan, *The Memoirs of Agha Khan* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1954) 335.