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What is Shi'a Islam?

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Abstract

The historical formation of the worldwide Muslim community or Umma, as it is known in Arabic, has resulted in a great deal of diversity that reflects a rich intellectual, spiritual, and institutional pluralism. In seeking to express a response to the primal message of Islam, Muslims have developed distinct perspectives that have led various groups to coalesce around different interpretations of the core message of the Qur'an and the example of the Prophet Muhammad. One such perspective is that of Shi'a Islam. Rather than perceive these expressions as sectarian in a narrow sense, it is more appropriate to recognise them as representing different communities of interpretation with diverse views of how the ideals of Islam might be realised in the life of the Umma.Unfortunately, much early scholarship on Shi'ism has represented this perspective as a dissident voice or heterodoxy, and in some cases has even characterised it as a 'Persian' response to 'Arab' Islam. Recent scholarship has created a more balanced view of Shi'ism. Thus, it is now possible to move beyond stereotypical assumptions and reject the viewthat there is an 'orthodox' or 'authentic' Islam, from which Shi'ism is a departure.

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The Shi‘a , like other Muslim groups, reflect their own diversity but share a common approach to the fundamentals of Islamic belief. While affirming, in common with their fellow Muslim believers theShahada,that is, belief in the unity of God and the model of divine guidance through God’s Messenger, the Prophet Muhammad, the Shi‘a maintain that for the spiritual and moral guidance of the community, God instructed the Prophet to designate a figure of authority to succeed him as leader of the Muslims. This authority was Imam ‘Ali, the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law. According to the Shi‘a, this conception of the community’s future leadership was made public by the Prophet in the last year of his life at Ghadir Khumm, where he designated Imam ‘Ali as his successor to lead the Muslims. While both Shi‘a and Sunni sources refer to this event, it is the specific interpretation of the role ofImam‘Ali as an authentic leader or ‘Imam of Guidance’ that distinguishes the Shi‘a interpretation of authority and leadership from that of other Muslim communities.

The word Shi‘a means ‘partisan’ or ‘adherent’. Specifically, it refers to those Muslims who became followers of ‘Ali, with the conviction that he and his descendants were the rightful authorities of the Muslim Community. For the Shi‘a, this conviction is implicit in the revelation of the Qur’an and the history of Islam, and is not merely the outcome of differences of a purely political nature following the death of the Prophet Muhammad. In order to understand how such an interpretation developed and created a distinctive Shi‘a identity in Muslim history, it is important to see how the Shi‘a ground the concept of guidance within their interpretation of the Qur’an and the life of the Prophet.

One aspect of the Qur’anic revelation that scholars of the Shi‘a tradition often emphasise is the notion of authority linked to the families of prophetic figures. This notion is evoked in the following Qur’anic verses:

> Truly, God chose Adam, Noah, the family of Abraham and the family of ‘Imran above all the worlds, as offspring one after the other. (Qur’an 3:33-34)

Each of them we preferred above the worlds and their fathers, descendants and brothers. We chose them and we guided them to the straight path… They are the ones to whom we have given the book, the authority and prophethood. (Qur’an 6:84-89)

During his lifetime, the Prophet Muhammad was both the recipient and expounder of divine revelation. His death in 632 CE marked the conclusion of the line of prophecy and the beginning of the debate over the nature of his legacy for future generations. This debate arose because of the absence of consensus over succession to the Prophet in the nascent Muslim community. From the beginning, there was a clear difference of views on this matter between theShi‘at ‘Ali, the Party of ‘Ali, who believed that the Prophet had designated ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (d. 661 CE) as his successor, and those who followed the leadership of the Caliphs. This latter group eventually coalesced into the majoritarian, Sunni branch of Islam, known collectively as the ‘People of the Sunna and the Community’,Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jama‘a.

The Shi‘a of Imam ‘Ali maintained that, while revelation ceased at the Prophet’s death, the need for the spiritual and moral guidance of the community, through an ongoing interpretation and implementation of the Islamic message, continued. They believed that the legacy of the Prophet Muhammad was entrusted to his family, the Ahl al-Bayt (literally, ‘People of the Household’) in whom the Prophet had invested authority. The first member of the Prophet’s family designated for leadership was Imam ‘Ali, the Prophet’s cousin and the husband of Fatima, his daughter and only surviving child. According to most traditions, Imam ‘Ali was the first male to support the message of Islam and had earned the Prophet’s admiration by championing the cause of Islam, even at the risk of his life. The Shi‘a espousal of the right of Imam ‘Ali and that of his descendants, through Fatima, to the leadership of the Muslim community was rooted in their understanding of the Holy Qur’an and its concept of rightly guided leadership, as reinforced by Prophetic traditions (Hadith).For the Shi‘a the most prominent of these traditions was the Prophet’s sermon at Ghadir Khumm, following his farewell pilgrimage to Mecca, in which he designated Imam ‘Ali as his successor. During this

sermon, the Prophet stated that he was leaving behind “two weighty things”(thaqalayn) - theHoly Qur’an and his family - for the future guidance of his community.

The importance of the Ahl al-Bayt for the Shi‘a is also demonstrated in an event linked to the revelation of a well-known Qur’anic verse: “God only wishes to remove from you all impurities,O Ahl al-Baytand purify you with a complete purification” (Qur’an 33:33). According to historical tradition, this verse concerns an event in the Prophet’s life when the Christian leadership of the town of Najran in Arabia challenged him as to the veracity of his mission. The two sides agreed upon a mutual imprecation, but the Christians eventually declined. Those referred to as theAhl al-Baytinthis Qur’anic passage were the Prophet Muhammad, Imam ‘Ali, Fatima, and the latter two’s sons,Hasan and Husayn. Shi‘as also refer to the Qur’anic verse:

> Say: I do not seek any reward from you, except love for those near to me (Qur’an 42:23).

The Shi‘a believe that this verse also refers to theAhl al-Bayt. While such interpretations are specific to the Shi‘a, all Muslims hold the Prophet’s family in great reverence and follow the admonition of the Qur’an:

> Truly God and His angels bless the Prophet. O you who believe, bless him and greet him with peace (Qur’an 33:50).

The Shi‘a attest that after the Prophet Mohammad, the authority for the guidance of the Muslim community was vested in Imam ‘Ali. Just as it was the prerogative of the Prophet to designate his successor, so it is the prerogative of each Imam of the time to designate his successor from among his male progeny. Hence, the office of the Imam, the Imamate, is passed on by heredity in the Prophet’s bloodline via Imam ‘Ali and Fatima.

The Early HIstory of Shi'i Islam

The early partisans of Imam ‘Ali included the so-called Qur’an Readers, several close Companions of the Prophet, prominent residents of the city of Medina, tribal chiefs of distinction, and other Muslims who had rendered important services to early Islam. Their

foremost teacher and guide was Imam ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib who, in his sermons and letters and in his admonitions to the leaders of the Quraysh tribe, reminded Muslims of the rights of his family.

Pro-‘Alid sentiments persisted in Imam ‘Ali’s lifetime. They were revived during the Caliphate of ‘Uthman (r. 644-656 CE), which was a period of strife in the Muslim community. Imam ‘Ali succeeded to the Caliphate in turbulent circumstances following ‘Uthman’s murder, leading to the first civil war in Islam. Centred in Kufa, in southern Iraq, the partisans of Imam ‘Ali now became designated asShi‘at ‘Ali, the ‘Party of ‘Ali’, or simply as the Shi‘a. They also refered to themselves by terms with more precise religious connotations, such asShi‘at Ahl al-Bayt(Party of the Prophet’s Household) or its equivalent,Shi‘at Al Muhammad(Party of the Family of Muhammad). The Umayyad, Mu‘awiya ibn Abi Sufyan (d. 680 CE), the powerful governor of Syria, cousin of ‘Uthman, and leader of the pro-‘Uthman party, found the call for avenging ‘Uthman’s murder a suitable pretext for seizing the Caliphate.

The early Shi‘a survived Imam ‘Ali’s murder in 661 CE and the tragic events that followed. After Imam ‘Ali, the Shi‘a of Kufa recognised his eldest son Hasan (d. 669.CE) as his successor to the Caliphate. However, Hasan chose not to assume this role and Mu‘awiya assumed the Caliphate. After making a peace treaty with Mu‘awiya, Hasan retired to Medina and abstained from political activity. However, the Shi‘a continued to regard him as their Imam after Imam ‘Ali. On Hasan’s death, the Kufan Shi‘a revived their aspirations for restoring the Caliphate to the Prophet’s family and invited Hasan’s younger brother Husayn, their new Imam, to rise against the oppressive rule of the Umayyads. In the aftermath of Mu‘awiya’s death and the succession of his son Yazid (r. 680-683 CE), Imam Husayn refused to acknowledge Yazid. Responding to the call of many of his followers and supporters, he set out for Kufa. On 10 Muharram 61 (10 October 680), Imam Husayn and his small band of relatives and companions were brutally massacred at Karbala, some distance from Kufa, where they were intercepted by an Umayyad army. The martyrdom of the Prophet’s grandson infused new fervour to the Shi‘a cause and contributed significantly to the consolidation of the Shi‘a ethos and identity. It also led to the formation of activist trends

among the Shi‘a. Later, the Shi‘a would commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Husayn on the tenth of Muharram. This holiday, which is more the commemoration of a tragedy than a festive celebration, is known as‘Ashura.

During the period of Umayyad rule (66l-750 CE), different Shi‘a groups, consisting of both Arab Muslims and new non-Arab converts, sought to support different candidates for the Imamate. The leadership of the Shi‘a grew beyond the immediate family of the Prophet Muhammad and now included other branches of the Banu Hashim, the Prophet’s extended family, including the descendants of the Prophet’s uncles Abu Talib and ‘Abbas. This was because the notion of the Prophet’s family was then conceived broadly, in its old Arabian tribal sense. As the Muslim world continued to expand geographically and more people from the conquered territories became part of the growingUmma, the various Muslim groups, including the Shi‘a, attracted new adherents.

A large group of the Shi‘a, known as theImamiyya (Imamis), adopted a quietist policy in the political field while concentrating on Islam’s intellectual promotion and development. Their Imams traced authority through Imam Husayn’s sole surviving son, Imam ‘Ali Zayn al-‘Abidin (‘Ornament of the Worshippers’, d. 712 CE), who was held in great esteem in the pious circles of Medina. It was after Imam ‘Ali Zayn al-‘Abidin that the Imami Shi‘a began to gain importance under his son and successor Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (d.731 CE). A small group chose to support Zayd, another son of Imam Zayn al-‘Abidin, and organised themselves to actively oppose Umayyad rule. This group and their followers later became known as the Zaydiyya (Zaydis).

Imam al-Baqir concentrated on being an active teacher during his Imamate of nearly 20 years. He also introduced the principle of taqiyya, the precautionary dissimulation of one’s true religious belief and practice that was to protect the Imams and their followers under adverse circumstances. His Imamate coincided with the growth and development of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh). In this formative period of Islam, Imam al-Baqir’s role was primarily as a reporter of Hadith and a teacher of law. Upon his death, his followers recognised his eldest

son Abu ‘Abdallah Ja‘far (d.765 CE), later called Imam al-Sadiq (the Trustworthy), as their new Imam.

In addition to the Zaydis, other proponents of the Shi‘a position - notably the Abbasids, descendants of the Prophet’s uncle ‘Abbas - embarked on a direct challenge to Umayyad rule. The Abbasids paid particular attention to developing the political organisation of their own movement, establishing secret headquarters in Kufa but concentrating their activities in eastern Iran and Central Asia. The Abbasid mission (da‘wa) was preached in the name of an unidentified person belonging to the Prophet’s family. This ideology aimed to maximise support from the Shi‘a of different groups who supported the leadership of the Ahl al-Bayt. In 749 CE, the Abbasids achieved victory over the Umayyads. They proclaimed Abul-‘Abbas al-Saffah (r. 749-754 CE) as the first Abbasid Caliph in the mosque of Kufa. The Abbasid victory proved a source of disillusionment for those Shi‘a who had expected a descendant of Imam ‘Ali, rather than an Abbasid, to succeed to the Caliphate. The animosity between the Abbasids and the ‘Alids increased when, soon after their accession, the Abbasids began to persecute many of their former Shi‘a supporters and ‘Alids and subsequently promoted a Sunni interpretation of Islam. The Abbasids’ breach with their Shi‘a roots was finally completed when the third Caliph of the dynasty, Muhammad al-Mahdi (r.775 - 785 CE), declared that the Prophet had actually appointed his uncle ‘Abbas, rather than Imam ‘Ali, as his successor.

Meanwhile, Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq had acquired a widespread reputation as a teacher and scholar. He was a reporter of Hadith and is cited as such in the chain of authorities (isnad) accepted by all Muslim schools of law. He also taught Islamic jurisprudence. He is credited with founding, along with his father, the Imami Shi‘a school of religious law. This school of law is now calledJa‘fariafter Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq. Imam al-Sadiq was accepted as a leading authority not only by his own Shi‘a partisans but also by a wider circle that included many Sunni Muslims. In time, Imam al-Sadiq acquired a noteworthy group of scholars around himself, comprising some of the most eminent jurists, traditionists, and theologians of the time such as Hisham ibn al-Hakam (d. 795 CE), then the foremost representative of Imami scholastic theology (kalam). During Imam Ja‘far’s Imamate, the Shi‘a came to develop

distinct positions on theological and legal issues and contributed to the wider debates and discussions within Muslim intellectual circles.

As a result of the activities of Imam al-Sadiq and his associates, and building on the teachings of Imam al-Baqir, the doctrine of the Imamate received its main outline, consolidating principles that were traced back to the teachings of the early Imams and the Prophet Muhammad. The first principle was that ofnass, the transfer of the Imamate by explicit designation. On the basis of nass, the Imamate could be located in a specific individual, whether or not the recipient claimed the Caliphate or exercised political authority. This principle established a separation of powers in Shi‘ism, detaching the necessity of political authority from the institution of the Imamate, according to historical circumstances. The second principle was that of an Imamate based on‘ilm, that is, special religious knowledge. In light of this knowledge, which was divinely inspired and transmitted through thenassof the preceding Imam, the rightful Imam of the time became the source of knowledge and spiritual teaching for his followers.

Rooted in the teachings of the Imams, the doctrine of the Imamate emphasises the complementarity between revelation and intellectual reflection. It recognises that the Holy Qur’an addresses different levels of meaning: the apparent meaning of the text, the legal parameters that guide human action, and the ethical vision that Allah intends to realise for human beings in an integrated moral society. According to the Shi‘a, the Qur’an thus offers believers the possibility of deriving new insights to address the needs of the time in which Muslims live.

The Shi‘a doctrine of the Imamate, expressed in numeroushadiths reported mainly from Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq, is preserved in the earliest collection of Shi‘a traditions, compiled by Abu Ja‘far Muhammad al-Kulayni (d. 940 CE). This doctrine was founded on the belief in the permanent need for a divinely guided Imam who, after the Prophet Muhammad, would act as an authoritatve teacher and a spiritual guide for humankind. While the Imam historically was entitled to both temporal leadership and religious authority, his mandate was independent of temporal power. This doctrine also confirmed the belief that the Prophet

designated Imam ‘Ali as his legatee (wasi) and successor, by an explicitnassunder divine command. After Imam ‘Ali, the Imamate was transmitted from father to son bynass, among the descendants of Imam ‘Ali and Fatima; after Imam Husayn, it would continue in the line of his descendants until the end of time.

Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq died in 765 CE. A conflict soon arose over who should be the next Imam. This dispute over the succession to Imam al-Sadiq resulted in new divisions within the Shi‘a and led to the eventual formation of the two main Shi‘a communities, the Ithna‘ashariyya or ‘Twelvers’ (also called Imamis), and theIsmailiyya, the Ismailis. The Ismailis, who followed Imam Muhammad ibn Isma‘il, a grandson of Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq, are the second largest Shi‘a community after the Twelvers. The third branch of the Shi‘a, the Zaydis, had their own separate historical development.

Imami ot Twelver Shi'ism

After Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq’s death, the majority of his followers acknowledged one of his surviving sons, Musa al-Kazim (d. 799 CE), as his successor to the Imamate. Placed under the control of the Abbasid rulers, Imam Musa was constrained in his activities and, according to his followers, was poisoned while being detained by the Abbasid Caliph’s representatives in Baghdad. He was succeeded by his son, ‘Ali al-Rida (d. 818 CE), who faced similar tribulations. After also dying under suspicious circumstances, he was buried in a place that has come to be known asMashhad(Place of Witness), one of the holiest sites in Iran. Imam ‘Ali al-Rida was succeeded by his very young son, Muhammad al-Jawad (d. 835 CE), also known as al-Taqi (‘The God Fearing’). Muhammad al-Jawad died in Baghdad at the age of 25 and was buried next to Musa al-Kazim. The next two Ithna‘ashari Imams, ‘Ali al-Hadi (d. 868 CE) and Hasan al-‘Askari (d. 874 CE), led very restricted lives under Abbasid detention. Both are believed to have died of poisoning and were buried in the Iraqi city of Samarra. The dome of their tomb in Samarra was destroyed by anti-Shi‘a insurgents in February 2006.

Hasan al-‘Askari’s followers believed that his successor, Muhammad al-Mahdi, was five years old when his father died. It is further held that soon after, Muhammad al-Mahdi went into ghayba, literally a state of ‘absence’ or occultation. Eventually, the main body of the

Imami Shi‘a held that Muhammad al-Mahdi had been born to Hasan al-‘Askari in 869 CE but that the child had remained hidden, even from his father. They further held that al-Mahdi had succeeded his father to the Imamate while remaining in concealment. Identified as the Mahdi (‘The Guided One’) or al-Qa’im(‘The Restorer’), Muhammad al-Mahdi is expected by the Imamis to reappear and rule the world with justice in the period immediately preceding the final Day of Judgment. Because he is the twelfth in the Imami line of Imams, his followers are called theIthna‘asharis, the Twelvers.

According to Imami tradition, Muhammad al-Mahdi’s occultation fell into two periods. The first, ‘lesser occultation’ (al-ghayba al-sughra) covered the years 874-941 CE. During this period, the Imam is believed to have remained in regular contact with four successive agents, called variously the Gate (Bab), Emissary (Safir), or Deputy (Na’ib), who acted as intermediaries between the Imam and his community. However, in the ‘greater occultation’ (al-ghayba al-kubra), which started in 941 CE and continues to this day, the hidden Imam does not act through a specific representative. Imami Shi‘a scholars have written extensively on the eschatological doctrine of the occultation of the twelfth Imam and the conditions that are expected to prevail before his return. These doctrines were institutionalised at the end of the first half of the 10th century CE, after the line of 12 Imams had been identified.

In the first period of their religious history, the Imami Shi‘as benefited from the direct guidance and teachings of their Imams. In the second period of Imami history, from the occultation of the twelfth Imam until the Mongol invasion in the 13th century CE, eminent scholars emerged as influential guardians and transmitters of the teachings of the Imams, compilingHadithcollections and formulating the Ja‘fari school of law. This period coincided with the rise of the Buyid, or Buwayhid Sultans (ca. 932-1055 CE). The Buyids were a military clan of Persian origin who came to power in Iran and Iraq and acted as overlords for the Sunni Abbasid Caliphs. The Buyids were originally Zaydi Shi‘as from Daylam in northern Iran, but once in power they supported Shi‘ism without allegiance to any of its specific branches. They also supported the rationalist Mu‘tazili school of Islamic theology. It was under their influence that Imami theology developed its rationalistic inclination. The earliest comprehensive collections of Imami traditions, which were first transmitted in Kufa

and other parts of Iraq, were compiled in the Iranian city of Qum. By the late 9th century CE, when the development of Imami tradition was well under way, Qum had already served for more than a century as a centre for Imami Shi‘a learning. The earliest and most authoritative of the Imami Hadith collections consist of four canonical compendia that deal with the subjects of theology and jurisprudence.

Shi‘a influence spread more widely to Iran and Central Asia after the Mongol conquest in the 13th century CE, creating a more favourable milieu in many formerly Sunni regions. A particularly broadly based Shi‘a tradition flowered in post-Mongol Central Asia, Iran, and Anatolia that in time would culminate in Safavid Shi‘ism (ca. 15th century CE). Safavid Shi‘ism has been characterised as ‘Tariqa Shi‘ism’, as it was transmitted mainly throughSufitariqas or orders that encouraged Shi‘i doctrines. These Sufi orders remained outwardly Sunni, following one or another of the Sunni schools of law, while being particularly devoted to Imam ‘Ali and theAhl al-Bayt. Among the Sufi orders that played a leading role in spreading this type of popular Shi‘ism, mention should be made of the Nurbakshiyya and the Ni‘matu’llahiyya. In the atmosphere of religious eclecticism that prevailed in Central Asia, ‘Alid loyalism became more widespread, and Shi‘a elements began to be integrated into the broader practices of Sufi groups. It was under such circumstances that close relations developed between Twelver Shi‘ism and Sufism as well as between Ismailism and Sufism in Iran. The most important Twelver Shi‘a mystic of the 14th century, who developed his own rapport between Imami Shi‘ism and Sufism, was Sayyid Haydar Amuli (d. 1383 CE) who was influenced by the Sufi teachings of the Spanish Muslim mystic, Ibn al-‘Arabi (d. 1240 CE).

Among the Sufi orders that contributed to the spread of Shi‘ism in predominantly Sunni Iran, the most important was the Safavi order, founded by Shaykh Safi al-Din (d. 1334 CE), a Sunni who practised Shafi‘i jurisprudence. The Safavi order spread rapidly throughout Azerbaijan, eastern Anatolia, and other regions, acquiring influence over a number of Turkoman tribes. Under Shaykh Safi’s fourth successor, Shaykh Junayd (d. 1460 CE), the order was transformed into an active military movement. Shaykh Junayd was the first Safavid spiritual leader to espouse specifically Shi‘a sentiments. Junayd’s son and successor, Shaykh

Haydar (d. 1488 CE), was responsible for instructing his soldier-Sufi followers to adopt the scarlet headgear of 12gores commemorating the 12 Imams, for which they became known as the Qizilbash,a Turkish term meaning ‘red-head’.
The Shi‘ism of the Qizilbash Turkomans became more clearly manifest when the youthful Isma‘il became the leader of the Safavi order. Isma‘il presented himself to his followers as the representative of the hidden twelfth Imam. With the help of his Qizilbash forces, he speedily seized Azerbaijan and entered its capital, Tabriz, in 1501. He then proclaimed himselfShahor king and at the same time declared Twelver Shi‘ism to be the official religion of the newly founded Safavid state. Shah Isma‘il brought all of Iran under his control during the ensuing decade. The Safavid dynasty ruled Iran until 1722 CE.

In order to enhance their legitimacy, Shah Isma‘il and his immediate successors claimed to represent theMahdi, or Hidden Imam. They also claimed ‘Alidorigins for their dynasty, tracing their ancestry to Imam Musa al-Kazim. Shi‘ism became the established religion of the Safavid state gradually. Under Shah Isma‘il (r. 1501-1524 CE) and his son Tahmasp (r. 1524-1576 CE), the Safavids articulated a religious policy that in partnership with Imami scholars actively propagated Twelver Shi‘ism. However, as Iran did not have an established class of Shi‘a religious scholars at that time, the Safavids were obliged to invite scholars from the Arab centres of Imami scholarship, notably Najaf, Bahrain, and Jabal Amil, to instruct their subjects. The foremost of these Arab Shi‘a scholars was Shaykh ‘Ali al-Karaki al-Amili (d. 1534 CE), also known as al-Muhaqqiq al-Thani (‘The Second Authority’).

Under the influence of Amili and others, the Safavids encouraged the training of a class of Imami legal scholars to teach the established doctrines of Twelver Shi‘ism. During the reign of Shah ‘Abbas I (r. 1587-1629 CE), Imami rituals and popular practices were established, such as pilgrimage visits (ziyara)to the tombs of the Imams and their relatives in Najaf, Karbala, and other shrine cities of Iraq, as well as in Mashhad and Qum inIran. The training of Imami scholars was further facilitated through the foundation of religious colleges in Isfahan, the Safavid capital. By the end of the 17th century CE, an influential class of Shi‘a religious scholars had developed in the Safavid state.

The Safavid period witnessed a renaissance of Muslim sciences and scholarship. Foremost among the intellectual achievements of the period were the original contributions of Shi‘a scholars that belonged to the so-called School of Isfahan. These scholars integrated the philosophical, theological, and mystical traditions of Shi‘ism into a methaphysical synthesis known as Divine Wisdom or theosophy (Persian, hikmat-i ilahi). The founder of the Shi‘ite theosophical school was Muhammad Baqir Astarabadi (d. 1630 CE), also known as Mir Damad, a Shi‘a theologian, philosopher, and poet, who served as the chief religious authority (Shaykh al-Islam) of Isfahan. The most important representative of the School of Isfahan was Mir Damad’s principal student, Sadr al-Din Muhammad Shirazi (d. 1640 CE), better known as Mulla Sadra. Mulla Sadra produced his own synthesis of Muslim thought, including theology, peripatetic philosophy, philosophical mysticism, and Sufi studies, particularly the Sufism of Ibn al-‘Arabi. Mulla Sadra trained eminent students, such as Mulla Muhsin Kashani (d. 1 680 CE) and ‘Abd al-Razzaq Lahiji (d. 1661 CE), who passed down the traditions of the School of Isfahan in later centuries in both Iran and India.

The Imami scholars, especially the jurists among them, played an increasingly prominent role in the affairs of the Safavid state. This trend reached its climax with Muhammad Baqir Majlisi (d. 1699 CE), who was the leading Twelver Shi‘a scholar and authority of the time. He is best known for compiling the encyclopedic collection of Shi‘a Hadith known asBiharal-anwar(‘Seas of Light’). Many of the Twelver scholars disagreed among themselves on theological and juristic issues and divided into two camps, generally designated as theAkhbari(the traditionalist school) and theUsuli(the rationalist school). Mulla Muhammad Amin Astarabadi (d. 1624 CE), one of the most influential Akhbari scholars, attacked the very idea of ijtihad in Islamic jurisprudence and branded the Usuli scholars enemies of the religion. Criticising earlier innovations inusul al-fiqh, the principles of jurisprudence, Astarabadi recognised theakhbar,the traditions of the Imams, as the most important source of Islamic law and the only valid resource for the correct understanding of the Qur’an and the way of the Prophet Muhammad.

The Akhbari school of Twelver Shi‘ism flourished for almost two centuries in Iran and the shrine cities of Iraq. In the second half of the 18th century, when Twelver Shi‘ism was

already widespread in Iran, the Usuli doctrine found a new champion in Muhammad Baqir Bihbahani (d. 1793 CE), who defended theijtihadof the jurists and successfully led the intellectual debate against the Akhbaris. Thereafter, the Akhbaris rapidly lost their position to the Usulis, who now emerged as the prevailing scholars of jurisprudence in Imami Shi‘ism. The reestablishment of the Usuli school led to an unprecedented enhancement of the authority of the legal scholars under the Qajar dynasty of Iran (r. 1794-1925). This enhancement of scholarly status placed the practice oftaqlid, the imitation of a noted jurist, at the centre of Imami jurisprudence.

Meanwhile, Imami Shi‘ism had also spread to southern Lebanon and certain regions of India. Twelver legal scholars, who were often of Persian origin, were particularly active in India. The Adil-Shahis of Bijapur (r. 1490-1686 CE) were the first Muslim dynasty in India to adopt Imami Shi‘ism as the religious doctrine of their state. Sultan Quli (r. 1496-1543 CE), the founder of the Qutb-Shahi dynasty of Golconda, also adopted Imami Shi‘ism. In India, the Imami ulama encountered the hostility of the Sunnis. Nur Allah Shushtari, an eminent Twelver theologian-jurist who emigrated from Iran to India and enjoyed some popularity at the Mughal court, was executed in 1610 CE at the instigation of the Sunni scholars. Despite such persecution, Shi‘a communities survived even in the Mughal empire, especially in the region of Hyderabad. Twelver Shi‘ism also spread to northern India and was adopted in the kingdom of Awadh (1722-1856) with its capital at Lucknow.

Developments in the Modern Period

The modern period of Imami Shi‘ism has been marked by two major influences. The first has been the expanding role and impact of European conquest and colonization in many parts of the Muslim world. The second has been the emergence of the modern nation-state as a means of uniting people with a common allegiance to territory and collective identity. While Iran was never directly conquered and ruled by European powers, it was deeply affected by the contested claims of territorial domination by various European states, in particular Russia, France and Britain, all of which sought to cultivate a zone of influence in the region.

One aspect of the response to European encroachment involved the modernisation of armies, the appropriation of technology and industry, and the gradual absorption of different systems of education and constitutional reforms. Changes took place unevenly in urban and rural areas, among various groups, and even within individual states. In general, traditional patterns of religious and educational life continued or even intensified in response to perceived alien influences. In places where the Twelver Shi‘a population was dominant, namely Iran and Iraq, different patterns of response to change emerged. In Iran, the religious scholars played an important role in helping the Qajar rulers resist Russian imperial designs and protested strongly against the granting of concessions by the state to foreign powers. A far more important debate also arose over the acceptance of constitutional ideas from Europe and their adaptation to the traditionally ruled Muslim state.

Shi‘a scholars, particularly Shaykh Muhammad Husayn Na’ini (d. 1936), argued strongly for the compatibility of constitutional ideas and Twelver traditions. In Iran, this led to a series of dramatic changes. Between 1905 and 1911, there took place a constitutional revolution, aimed at reframing the rules of governance and limiting the role of the absolute Qajar monarchs. However, this political experiment failed, and following short periods of British control, power in Iran was seized in 1921 by an army colonel, Reza Khan, who soon deposed the Qajar dynasty and declared himself Shah. Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925-1941) instituted a series of reforms of a secular nature that greatly curtailed the role and influence of religious scholars and the Twelver establishment in Iran. His son and successor, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1941 -1979), continued the general policies of his father. In the 1950s, a strong secular nationalist movement led by Dr. Mohammed Mossadegh gained strength. This movement was thwarted with the help of the American Central Intelligence Agency, and the position of the Shah came to be consolidated even further. Many leading religious scholars were moved to intensify debate on the issues of the time at the various centres of Shi‘a learning. Among them were Allama Muhammad Husayn Tabataba’i (d. 1981) and Murtaza Mutahhari (d. 1979). A number of religious leaders came to be regarded as successors to the great Ayatollah Burujirdi (d. 1961), to whom the title of Marja‘-i Taqlid (‘Source of Imitation’) had been given by his peers.

Meanwhile in Iraq, the Shi‘a religious leaders played an unsuccessful role in resisting British rule after World War I, although in conjunction with scholars from Iran they engaged actively in debating the issues of the day. Eventually, the Middle East was divided into several spheres of influence and Iraq came to be governed under a British mandate, which led to the appointment of King Faisal I (r. 1921-1933) as ruler of an independent Iraq. In 1958, there was a coup by army officers, leading to the execution of King Faisal II and a sustained period of instability. Subsequently, another military dictatorship was established in Iraq by Saddam Hussein, during whose long rule all religious opposition was brutally suppressed.

During the 1960s, a lesser known but politically active Iranian religious scholar named Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini called for the abolition of the monarchy in Iran. He was sent into exile in Iraq, where he continued his oppostion to the Iranian regime. There were also other intellectuals, not directly linked to the religious authorities, who challenged the status quo in Iran. These nonclerical intellectuals helped marshal the resources that brought Twelver Shi‘ism into dialogue with contemporary ideologies. The most famous of these intellectuals, ‘Ali Shariati (d. 1977), catalyzed student and youth opposition through his writings and lectures. Traditionally trained scholars, such as Murtaza Mutahhari, also added their voices to the mounting opposition. However, Khomeini marshaled the forces of opposition to the Shah most successfully. Khomeini’s leadership led to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the abolition of the Pahlavi monarchy, and the inauguration of the Islamic Republic of Iran. After the revolution, a constitutional structure emerged in Iran that institutionalised the role of the Twelver scholars as representatives of the Hidden Imam and guardians of the state. An institutionalised ideology,vilayat-i faqih(the authority of the jurist), was written into the Iranian constitution. This ideology established a leading role for the supreme religious leader in the affairs of the state, while also allowing for an elected legislative body, themajlisor parliament, and an elected president. After Khomeini’s death in 1989, the role of the supreme leader has been assumed by Ayatollah ‘Ali Khamenei.

In Iran, Iraq, and parts of Lebanon, recent political developments continue to be influential in discussions and debates about the Twelver Shi‘a heritage. Imami Shi‘a communities, meanwhile, have continued to thrive in many other regions. In addition to Azerbaijan,

Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and India, there are Twelver Shi‘a communities in parts of Africa, Asia, Europe and North America.

Doctrines and Practices of Twelver Shi'ism

For all Shi‘a, the period up to the death of Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq constitutes a shared legacy. During this period, the Shi‘a preserved the traditions of the Prophet and the early Imams, began the development of a tradition of legal thought, and laid the foundations of what in due course represented a strong tradition of philosophical and esoteric interpretation of Islam. “I am the city of knowledge and ‘Ali is its gate; so whoever desires knowledge, let him enter the gate.” Thishadith,attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, highlights the complementarity of roles envisaged in Shi‘ism. Reference has already been made to Imam ‘Ali’s intimate engagement with the mission of the Prophet and his active role in the cause of Islam. This engagement is highlighted by Shi‘a sources to affirm Imam ‘Ali’s key role in the history of the interpretation of the Qur’an, a commitment to the application of reason in matters of faith, an emphasis on ethical conduct and social justice, the importance of a personal search for knowledge, and the cultivation of an inner life in communion with God. Many of Imam ‘Ali’s teachings were preserved in a work titledNahj al-Balagha(‘The Way of Eloquence’), which highlights his foundational role in inspiring Shi‘a intellectual and spiritual traditions. In this context, the Imam has a pivotal role in Shi‘a Islam, linking revelation to daily human life and giving expression to practical forms in society by which the ethical ideals of Shi‘ism can be realised.

The ideal of social juctice and its defence is evoked in Shi‘a sources, with particular reference to the life of Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet. For resisting the tyrannical rule of the second Umayyad Caliph Yazid, Imam Husayn and his followers were massacred at Karbala, in present day Iraq. This event, commemorated during the first ten days of the month of Muharram in the Muslim calendar, has central significance in Imami Shi‘a spirituality. The martyrdom of Imam Husayn, who is called Sayyid al-Shuhada’ or ‘Lord of the Martyrs’, not only catalysed the opponents to Umayyad rule but also provided a focus for Shi‘a religious expression, strengthening loyalty around the Ahl al-Bayt and their cause of

restoring a pious society among the Muslims. Both, Imam Muhammad al-Baqir and Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq, consolidated the position of the Shi‘a and elaborated the intellectual basis of the interpretation andpractice of Shi‘a Islam outside of the existing political order. They also acted as important reference points for the ongoing development of Shi‘a spirituality and religious rituals.

A distinctive aspect of Shi‘a theological and legal traditions, compared to those of the Sunnis, was the elevation of reason and the use ofHadiththransmitted through their Imams. The Imamis or Twelvers, like all Shi‘a, regard independent reasoning,ijtihad,as a significant tool in jurisprudential thought. In theology, this principle allowed Twelver Shi‘as to give rational principles a wide scope in the intellectual tradition. In the absence of the Imam,ijtihadcould only be exercised by competent and qualified religious scholars. Such individuals, called mujtahids, became the major source of authoritative guidance on daily issues facing believers. These scholars received their training in centres where religious learning was preserved and transmitted. Known asmadrasas,these traditional centres of learning developed in key centres where the Imami Shi‘a community was strong. In addition to centres in Iraq, such as in Najaf and Karbala, there were also important institutions of religious learning in Iran - in Qum, Mashhad and Isfahan - and subsequently in the Indian subcontinent. These centres trained scholars and jurists to educate and serve the Shi‘a community and created important networks for the preservation and continuity of Twelver Shi‘a learning.

While all Shi‘a share the core practices of Islam with other Muslim communities, distinctive ceremonies and traditions have evolved in Shi‘a Islam, grounded in Shi‘ism’s particular set of experiences and interpretations. In addition to the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca and visiting the Prophet’s tomb in Medina, Imami Shi‘as regard it as important to visit the tombs of the Imams and their descendants, who in Persian are known asImamzadehs. The most important of these tombs are in Najaf (the burial place of Imam ‘Ali), Karbala (the burial place of Imam Husayn), al-Kazimayn in Baghdad (the tomb of the fifth and ninth Imams), Mashhad (Imam al-Rida), and Samarra (the tomb of the tenth and eleventh Imams), which is also where the twelfth Imam went into occultation. Another popular site of pilgrimage is Qum, where the sister of the eighth Imam ‘Ali al-Rida is buried. There are also holy sites in Cairo (believed to

be the place where Imam Husayn's head was kept) and Damascus (associated with Zaynab, the sister of Imam Husayn).

The commemoration of Imam Husayn's martyrdom is of particular significance and is remembered during the month of Muharram through processions in which intense grief is displayed. At majalis, sessions devoted to the commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn, preachers recount the events of his death in sermons known asrawda-khani,and prayers are offered. Believers also reenact the tragedy of Imam Husayn and chant poems, often through elaborate dramatic performances calledta'ziyeh. The events of Karbala are commemorated globally, wherever Twelver Shi'a communities can be found, and are enriched by local tradition and poetry. The gathering places at which such events take place are known asHusayniyyas orImambaras,which consist of extensive, decorated structures adorned with images that recall the tragedy.

Ismaili Shi'ism

After Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq's death in the 8th century CE, those of his followers who were loyal to his eldest son Imam Isma'il and his descendants struggled to keep their hopes alive. The descendants of Imam Isma'il, the eponym of the Ismaili Shi'as, lived in very hazardous circumstances in various secret localities. By the middle of the 9th century CE, they had settled in Salamiyya in Syria. During this period, they concealed their identity from the public and sought to consolidate and organise the widely dispersed Ismaili community. The scholars and local leaders of the Ismailis, known as da'is or 'Summoners', maintained contact with the Imams and organised themselves into ada'wa, a network of shared commitment to the Imam and intellectual values. When they emerged into the public limelight at the beginning of the 10th century, the Ismaili community was remarkably well organised and cohesive. This community relied on a missionary network of dedicated leaders orda'is (literally, 'those who summon'), who conveyed the teachings of the Ismaili Imams effectively and with great intellectual competence.

The Ismailida'issought to extend their influence and forge alliances to create the foundations of a possible state under the rule of the Imam. The opportunity of laying the foundations for a

state gained momentum at the beginning of the 10th century CE, when the Ismaili Imam of the time, ‘Abdallah, moved from Syria to North Africa. In 910 CE, he was proclaimed Amir al-Mu’minin (‘Commander of the Believers’), with the title ofal-Mahdi(‘The Guided One’, equivalent to the idea of ‘The Saviour’). The dynasty of the Ismaili Imams, who for more than two centuries reigned over an extensive empire centred in Egypt, adopted the title ofal-Fatimiyyun(commonly rendered as Fatimids) after Fatima, the Prophet Muhammad’s daughter and wife of Imam ‘Ali, from whom the Imams were descended. The proclamation of Imam ‘Abdallah al-Mahdi as the first Fatimid Caliph marked the beginning of the Ismaili attempt to give a concrete shape to their vision of Shi‘a Islam.

From their initial base in the present-day country of Tunisia, the Fatimids expanded their realm of influence and authority, advancing to Egypt during the reign of the fourth Fatimid Imam and Caliph al-Mu‘izz. In 973 CE, Imam-Caliph al-Mu‘izz transferred the Fatimid capital from North Africa to the new city of al-Qahira (Cairo), which was founded by the Fatimids in 969 CE. Henceforth, Cairo became the centre of a far-flung empire, which at its peak, extended westward to North Africa, Sicily, and other Mediterranean locations, and eastward to Palestine, Syria, the Yemen, and the Hijaz with its holy cities of Mecca and Medina. The Fatimid territories participated vigorously in international trade with North Africa, Nubia, the Middle East, Europe, Byzantium (Constantinople in particular), the islands of the Mediterranean andIndia. Agriculture advanced to a level of general self-sufficiency; industry received active stimulus from the state and helped boost both inland and maritime trade.

It was, however, in the sphere of intellectual life that the Fatimid achievement seems most brilliant and outstanding. The Fatimid rulers were lavish patrons of learning. Their encouragement of scientific research and cultural pursuits attracted the finest minds of the age to the Caliphal court in Cairo, regardless of religious persuasion. Such luminaries included mathematicians and physicists, astronomers, physicians, historians, geographers and poets. Al-Azhar, the chief Cairo mosque built by the Imam and Caliph al-Mu‘izz and endowed by his successors, also became a great centre of learning. The Dar al-‘Ilm (‘House of Knowledge’), which was established in Cairo in 1005 CE by the Imam and Caliph al-

Hakim (r. 996-1021 CE), became famous as a leading institution of learning. Its programme of studies combined a range of major academic disciplines, from the study of the Qur'an and the Prophetic traditions to jurisprudence, philology and grammar, medicine, logic, mathematics and astronomy. This institution, with its library of over 400,000 manuscripts, was open to followers of different religions. The impact of this cultural and intellectual flowering was not limited to the Muslim world. The influence of the academic institutions of Cairo and other centres of Ismaili scholarship spread into Europe, contributing significantly to the development of scientific thought and philosophy in the West.

Ismaili intellectuals of outstanding ability, such as Abu Hatim al-Razi, Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani, al-Qadi al-Nu'man, Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani, al-Mu'ayyad fi'l-Din al-Shirazi, and Nasir-i Khusraw, made significant contributions to the articulation of Muslim thought and to Shi'a literature. They wrote extensively, employing the philosophical tools of the age, to promote a comprehensive understanding of the concepts of tawhid (unity of God), prophecy, and the Imamate on the basis of general Islamic and Shi'a principles. Nasir-i Khusraw (d. after 1072 CE), the well-known poet-philosopher who spread Ismaili Shi'ism in Central Asia, sought to demonstrate the relationship between philosophy and prophetic wisdom, stressing the indispensability of prophetic wisdom for the development of human intellect. In the same vein, Hasan-i Sabbah (d. 1124 CE), the founder of an Ismaili state based at the fortress of Alamut in Iran, expounded afresh the early Shi'a doctrine ofta'lim(literally, 'education'), the need of humankind for revelational guidance as interpreted by each Imam of the age.

The founding of the Fatimid Caliphate also provided the first opportunity for the promulgation of Ismaili Shi'a jurisprudential principles. The Ismaili exposition of these principles was based on Imam 'Ali's teachings, which had been the inspiration for the doctrinal elaborations by Imams Muhammad al-Baqir and Ja'far al-Sadiq. In light of these teachings, the Fatimid law was formulated and implemented, above all, with due deference to their universalistic philosophy of religious tolerance and respect for difference. The spirit of Fatimid state policy was succinctly inscribed in one of their edicts: "Each Muslim may try to find his own solution within his religion." In the same spirit, the Fatimids encouraged the private patronage of mosques and other pious endowments by Muslims of different legal

schools, their policy reflecting the historical fact of a plurality of pious ways rather than a monolithic interpretation of religion.

For appointments in the Fatimid judiciary, as in other branches of government, merit was a primary criterion. In elevating a Sunni jurist to the position of Chief qadi or judge, the Imam and Caliph al-Hakim, for example, praised the appointee's sense ofjustice and intellectual calibre as determining factors. The period of Fatimid rule is also noteworthy for the support and encouragement given to Christians and Jews within the state. Many Coptic and Armenian Christians as well as Jews attained important positions, and the two communities participated actively in the social, cultural, intellectual and economic life of the larger society. The Fatimids founded this encouragement on the Qur'anic principle of respect for the Ahl al-Kitab, the People of the Book, which included the Christian and Jewish communities.

In the last decade of the 11th century CE, the Ismaili community suffered a permanent schism over the question of succession to the Imam and Caliph al-Mustansir Bi'llah, who died in 1094 CE. One section of the community recognised his younger son al-Musta'li, who had succeeded to the Fatimid Caliphate as the next Imam. The other faction supported al--Mustansir's elder son and designated heir, Nizar, as the Imam. The Nizari Ismaili Imams of modern times, known under their hereditary title of the Aga Khan, trace their descent to Imam Nizar. Today, the two Ismaili branches are the Musta'li and Nizari, named after al-Mustansir's sons who claimed his heritage.

The Nizari Ismailis

The seat of the Nizari Imamate moved to Iran, where the Ismailis had already succeeded, under the leadership of Hasan-i Sabbah, in establishing a state comprising a network of fortified settlements. With its headquarters at Alamut, in northern Iran, the Nizari state later extended to parts of Syria. Although there were continual wars among Muslims over issues of power and territory, this period of Muslim history does not paint a simple canvas of one camp fighting another. The military situation was further complicated by the presence of the Crusaders, who were in contact with the Nizari Ismailis of Syria. Shifting alliances among all these different groups was the normal order of the times.

It was within this context of debilitating warfare among Muslims and the rising Mongol threat to the Muslim world that the Nizari Ismaili Imam Jalal al-Din Hasan (r. 1210-1221 CE), who ruled from Alamut, embarked on a policy of rapprochement with Sunni rulers and jurists. The Sunnis reciprocated positively, and the Abbasid Caliph al-Nasir acknowledged the legitimacy of the Ismaili Imam's rule over a territorial state. Imam Jalal al-Din's policy, like that of his Fatimid forebears, was a practical affirmation that while differences in the interpretation of sacred texts exist among Muslims, what matters most are the overarching principles that unite them all. In these trying times of struggle, military encounters and changing alliances, the Ismailis of the Alamut state did not forsake their intellectual and literary traditions. Their fortresses housed impressive libraries with collections of books on various religious subjects and included philosophical and scientific tracts as well as scientific equipment. Nor did the hostile environment force the Nizari Ismailis to abandon their liberal policy of patronage to men of learning, which benefited Muslim as well as non-Muslim scholars and scientists. Their settlements in Iran also served as sanctuaries for waves of refugees, irrespective of creed, who fled both local conflicts and the Mongol onslaught. Alamut finally fell to the Mongols in 1256 CE. Subsequently, many Nizari Ismailis found refuge in Afghanistan, Transoxania in Central Asia, China, and the Indian subcontinent, where large Ismaili settlements had existed since the 9th century CE.

The Ismailis who remained in Iran had to protect their identity to escape persecution. Given the esoteric nature of their tradition, Sufi orders often provided hospitality to the Ismailis. Though the Sufi orders then prevalent in the Iranian lands were predominantly Sunni, all of them held Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib in high esteem. During this difficult phase, the institution of the Ismaili Imamate retained its resilience. In the 14th century, under the influence of the Nizari Imams, new centres of Nizari activity were established in the Indian subcontinent, Afghanistan, the mountainous regions of Hindukush, Central Asia, and parts of China. In South Asia, the Nizari Ismailis became known as Khojas, and they developed a distinctive devotional literature known as the Ginans.

Developments in the Modern Period

The modern Nizari Ismaili community has a global presence. Historically, the community reflected a wide geographical and ethnographic diversity based on the various cultural regions of the world where its members originated and lived. Today, the Ismaili heritage includes the cultures of Central Asia, Persia, the Arab Middle East and South Asia. During the 19th and 20th centuries, many Ismailis from South Asia migrated to Africa and settled there. In more recent times, there has been migration from all parts of the Ismaili world to North America and Europe. The shared values that unite Ismailis are centred on their allegiance to a living Imam. At present, this is the 49th hereditary Imam and descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, Prince Karim Aga Khan. The authority and guidance of the Imam provides the enabling framework for the development of the Ismaili community and for the continuity of its Muslim heritage.

The modern phase of Nizari Ismaili history, as with other Muslims, can be dated to the 19th century and to the significant historical changes arising from the growth and enlargement of European presence and power in the Muslim world. Following a period of change and turmoil in Iran during the 1840s, the 46th Imam, Hasan ʻAli Shah, went to India. He was the first Nizari Imam to bear the title of Aga Khan, which was granted to him by the Persian monarch Fath ʻAli Shah Qajar. His leadership enabled the community in India to lay the foundations for institutional and social developments and also fostered more regular contacts with Ismaili communities in other parts of the world. After his death in 1881, he was succeeded by his son Imam ʻAli Shah, Aga Khan II, who continued to build on the institutions created by his father, with a particular emphasis on providing modern education for the community. He also played an important role representing Muslims in the emerging political institutions under British rule in India. Following his early death in 1885, Aga Khan II was succeeded by his eight-year old son, Imam Sultan Mahomed Shah, Aga Khan III. Aga Khan III was Imam for 72 years, the longest in Ismaili history, and his life spanned dramatic political, social and economic transformations. His long-term involvement in international affairs, his advocacy of Muslim interests in troubled times, and his commitment to the advancement of education, particularly for Muslim women, reflect his significant and generous contributions. It was his leadership as Imam, however, that transformed the modern

history of the Nizari Ismailis, enabling them to adapt successfully to the challenges of the 20th century.

In South Asia and Africa, the Nizari Ismailis established administrative strutures, eductional institutions, and health services, and built on economic opportunities in trade and industry. In 1905, the Nizari Ismaili community in East Africa adopted a constitution, which laid the basis for an organised framework of institutions and governance at local, regional and national levels. Similar constitutions were created for other Ismaili communities and were revised periodically, providing guidance for the conduct of personal law and its place within the context of the laws of each country in which the Ismailis resided. In 1986, the present Imam, Prince Karim Aga Khan, extended this practice to the worldwide Nizari Ismaili community. The revised Ismaili constitution, which serves the social governance needs of all Nizari Ismailis, facilitates a unified approach to internal organisation and external relations, while taking account of regional diversity and local differences. As in the past, Ismailis follow a strong tradition of voluntary service, contributions, and donations of time, expertise, and personal resources to the Imam and communal institutions.

The present Nizari Imam assumed his post in 1957, at a time when much of the developing world, including the Muslim world, was going through an important period of transition, often marked by political change and upheaval. These continued throughout the 20th century, making it particularly vital that the Ismailis were guided appropriately through periods of crises and tumultuous changes, as in East Africa and the subcontinent, and later in Tajikistan, Iran, Syria and Afghanistan. Social and political dislocation often meant that humanitarian concerns for the rehabilitation and resettlement of refugees took priority, and a significant number of Ismailis emigrated to Britain, other European countries, Canada, and the United States.

While the internal institutional organisations of the Nizari Ismaili community continued to be strengthened and reorganised to respond to changing conditions, the Imam also created new institutions to better serve the complex development needs of the community and the societies in which his followers lived. This gave rise to the establishment of the AKDN (Aga

Khan Development Network) with the goal of creating strategies for sustainable human development conducive to the fulfilment of the cultural, economic, social, and spiritual aspirations of individuals and communities. A number of institutions within the AKDN pursue a variety of programmes in economic development, education social development, culture, and the environment across the world, in both rural and urban settings, with a particular emphasis on disadvantaged populations.

Doctrines and Practices

The essence of Shi'ism lies in the search for the true meaning of revelation in order to understand the purpose of life and human destiny. By virtue of the authority ()invested in Imam 'Ali by the Prophet, each Imam of the time is the inheritor of the Prophet's authority, the trustee of his legacy, and the guardian of the Qur'an. The role of the Imam in guiding the path to spiritual self-realisation conveys the essence of the relationship between the Imam and his follower (murid), symbolised in the traditional pledge of allegiance (bay'a) that each murid makes to the Imam of the time. The replacement of the line of prophecy with that of Imamate, therefore, ensures the balance between the Shari'a,the exoteric aspect of the faith, and the Haqiqa, its esoteric, spiritual essence. Neither the exoteric (zahir) nor the esoteric (batin) aspect of the religion obliterates the other. The Imam is the path to the believer's inward, spiritual elevation and is the religious authority that makes the Shari'a relevant according to the needs of the time. This emphasis on an inner, spiritual life in harmony with the exoteric performance of the Shari'a is an aspect of the faith that finds acceptance among many communities in both branches of Islam, whether Shi'a or Sunni.

The Imamate thus enables believers to go beyond the apparent or outward form of the revelation in their search for its inner spirituality and meaning. Under the guidance of each Nizari Imam, the meaning of the Qur'an unfolds afresh in each age. The ultimate Shi'a expectation is not a new revelation but the complete understanding of the spiritual meaning of the final revelation granted to the Prophet Muhammad. This constitutes the Shi'a notion of Islam's spiritual dynamism through the line of Imams, whose main role is to foster

continuing submission to the Divine Command. This principle ensures the ever-continuing vitality of theShari‘a,the normative law, and the practices derived from it. These practices are the foundation of Ja‘fari Imami Shi‘a jurisprudence, as elaborated by Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq, who is accepted by both Imami and Ismaili Shi‘a Muslims as their Imam.

Both communities, accordingly, subscribe to the fundamentals of Islam and its core practices. They accept the Holy Qur’an, correctly interpreted, as the source of guidance for all times. They respect the Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad as reported via the ‘Alid Imams, in addition to the norms specified by the Imams themselves. They reserve the right of interpretation of the Qur’an to the Imams from the progeny of the Prophet. As a religious principle, they place obedience to the Imams immediately after obedience to God and the Prophet. This belief is derived from the command in the Qur’an that Muslims obey God and the Prophet, and those vested with authority. When in doubt about the correct course to follow, they are to submit to the Imam’s judgment. The Imams are the People of Remembrance (Ahl al-Dhikr), endowed with the competent knowledge of the revealed message.

Shi‘as perform their congregational prayers in mosques, to which all Muslims go. In addition to the practices prescribed by theShari‘a,the Nizari Ismailis observe their own distinctive practices such as supplicatory and intercessionary prayers(du‘a),meditative sessions of remembrance (dhikr), and the recitation of devotional poetry. Such practices usually take place in IsmailiJamatkhanas (literally, ‘assembly–houses’). Ismaili assembly-houses are designated by the Imam of the time for the use ofmurids who have given the bay‘a, the oath of allegiance, and whosebay‘athe Imam has accepted. As an integral part of the religious landscape of the Muslim world,Jamatkhanasare part of an institutional category that serves a number of Shi‘a and Sunni communities in their respective contexts. For many centuries, a prominent feature of the religious landscape of Islam has been gathering spaces that coexist in harmony with the mosque. Historically serving communities of different interpretations and spiritual affiliations, these spaces range from the ribat, tikya, andzawiyaof the Sufis to theHusayniyyaandJamatkhanaof the Shi‘a.

The practices of the Nizari Ismailis have evolved over many centuries in a multiplicity of cultural milieus, stretching from North Africa and the Middle East, through Iran, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and China, to South Asia. The resulting diversity ofthese practices corresponds to the multiple cultural, linguistic, and literary traditions of the Nizari Ismailis, which reflects the pluralism of the of the MuslimUmmawithin the fundamental unity of Islam. This unity among Muslims is evident, for example, in their common practices derived from theShari‘aand common festivals, such as‘Id al-Fitr (the feast of fast-breaking at the end of Ramadan) andMilad al-Nabi(thecelebration of the Prophet Muhmmad’s birthday), which are celebrated by Muslims of all persuasions. In addition, Shi‘a Muslims gather specifically for Shi‘a festivals such as ‘Id al-Ghadir, the commemoration of the event of Ghadir al-Khumm, where the Prophet designated Imam ‘Ali as his successor. This unity among Muslims has historically coexisted with the right of each school of Islamic thought to practice its particular interpretation of the central tenets of Islam.

The Musta'li Ismailis

The Musta‘li Ismailis share with the Nizari Ismailis a common Fatimid heritage, although they no longer have an Imam who is present in their community. Instead, they take guidance from the leadership of the Da‘i Mutlaq(Supreme Authority), the representative of the concealed Imam, to maintainintellectual and legal traditions of their daily life. The Musta‘li Imams themselves have remained in concealment since 1130 CE. In their absence, supreme authorities known asDa‘i Mutlaqhave led their community. For all practical purposes, theDa‘iis a substitute for the hidden Musta‘li Imam. As in the case of Imams, the Musta‘liDa‘isappoint their successors. From the 12th century onwards, the Musta‘li Ismailis were based primarily in Yemen and later to an increasing extent in India, where they became known as Bohras. After 1589 CE, the community became divided into Daudi and Sulaymani branches over allegiance to different individuals asDa‘i Mutlaq.There are no significant differences between the doctrines of the two branches of Musta‘li Ismailism. The presentDa‘iof the majoritarian group, the Tayyibi Daudis, is Sayyidna Muhammad Burhan al-Din, the 52nd in the series. He lives in Mumbai (Bombay), where the leadership has moved from its earlier headquarters in Gujarat. The Daudis are found mostly in South Asia, to a

lesser extend in Yemen, and in small immigrant communities in Britain, North America and Sri Lanka. The other Musta'li group, the Sulaymanis, recognise 'Abdallah ibn Muhammad al-Makrami as the 51stDa'i,with his headquarters in Yemen. Following the annexation of the province of Najran from the Yemen to Saudi Arabia in 1934, a smaller community of Sulaymanis is also to be found there with a much smaller number in India.

Since 1817, the office ofDa'i Mutlaqof the Daudis has remained in the progeny of Shaykh Jiwanji Awrangabadi. Two recentDa'ishave played important roles in the modern Tayyibi Daudi community. Sayyidna Tahir Sayf al-Din became leader in 1915 and was succeeded in 1965 by his son, the presentDa'iSayyidna Muhammad Burhan al-Din (b. 1915). Sayyidna Muhammad has continued to emphasise the strong tradition of learning in the Daudi community. This is reflected in the development of two major libraries in the Indian cities of Mumbai and Surat and the enlargement of their main seminary, Jami'a Sayfiyya, in Surat, an academy of learning and training for religious scholars and functionaries of the community. There are well-establishedmadrasasfor the religious education of all Daudi Bohras as well as schools for secular education. The tradition of retaining the heritage of learning through manuscript study has been well preserved, and scholarly and literary works, primarily in Arabic, continue to be developed within the community. The Musta'li Ismailis, both Daudi and Sulaymani, have preserved a significant portion of the Arabic literature of the Ismailis ofearlier times.

The Daudi community is organised under the leadership of theDa'i,with its headquarters in Mumbai. A representative, known as Shaykh or'Amil, leads the local community and organises its religious and social life, including the maintenance of places for religious worship and ritual, as well as communal buildings. Every Daudi, on attaining the age of 15, is obliged to take an oath of allegiance (mithaq) to the Imams andDa'is.The majority of Ismaili Bohras are in business and industry and have a well-deserved reputation for entrepreneurship and public service. They also run many charitable organisations for the welfare of their communities worldwide.

The Sulaymani community is of predominantly Arab origin and lives mostly in Yemen. It is found in both urban and rural areas, with strong tribal roots. The Sulaymani community of Najran in Saudi Arabia has often found it difficult to practice its faith openly and freely because of pressure from the official Wahhabi sect of Saudi Arabia. The much smaller Sulaymani community in India has produced noted public officials and scholars. There are certain differences between the traditions and the social practices of the Arabic-speaking Yemeni Sulaymanis and the Daudis of South Asia, who use a form of the Gujarati written in Arabic script. The Daudi Bohras have also incorporated many Hindu customs in their marriage and other ceremonies.

Zaydi Shi'ism

The influence and geographical distribution of the Zaydis, named after their fourth Imam Zayd ibn ‘Ali Zayn al-‘Abidin (d. 740 CE), have been more restricted than the Twelvers and the Ismailis. In fact, after some initial success in Iraq, Zaydi Shi‘ism remained confined to the Caspian region, northern Iran, and most importantly in Yemen, where Zaydi communities have continued to exist to the present.

The Zaydi branch of Shi‘ism developed out of Zayd ibn ‘Ali’s abortive revolt in Kufa in 740 CE.The movement was initially led by Zayd’s son Yahya, who escaped from Kufa to Khurasan and concentrated his activities in what is now eastern Iran and Central Asia. Yahya was eventually tracked down by the Umayyads and killed in 743 CE. In the early Abbasid period, the Zaydis were led by another of Zayd’s sons, ‘Isa (d.783 CE). By the middle of the 9th century CE, the Zaydis shifted their attention away from Iraq and concentrated their activities in regions far removed from the centres of Abbasid power. These regions included Daylam, in northern Iran, and Yemen, where two Zaydi states were soon founded.

The Zaydis elaborated a doctrine of the Imamate that clearly distinguished them from the Twelver Shi‘as and the Ismailis. The Zaydis did not recognise a hereditary line of Imams, nor did they attach any significance to the principle of designation,nass.Initially, they accepted any member of the Ahl al-Bayt as apotential Imam, although later the Imams were restricted

to the descendants of Imams Hasan or Husayn. According to Zaydi doctrine, if an Imam wished to be recognised, he would have to assert his claims publicly in an uprising (khuruj), in addition to having the required religious knowledge. Many Zaydi Imams were learned scholars and authors. In contrast to the Twelvers and the Ismailis, the Zaydis excluded underage males from the Imamate. They alsorejected the eschatological idea of a concealed Mahdi and his expected return. In fact, messianic tendencies were rather weak in Shi‘ism. Because of their emphasis onactive policies, the observance of taqiyya, the dissimulation of actual beliefs, was also alien to Zaydi teachings. However, the Zaydis developed the doctrine of hijra,the obligation to emigrate from a land dominated by unjust, non-Zaydi rulers.

The Zaydis were less radical than Imami Shi‘as in their condemnation of the early Caliphs. They held that Imam ‘Ali had been Imam by designation of the Prophet. However, this designation was unclear and obscure, so that its intended meaning could be understood only through investigation. After Imam Husayn ibn ‘Ali, the Imamate could be claimed by any qualified descendant of Imams Hasan or Husayn who was prepared to launch an armed uprising against the illegitimate rulers and to issue a formal summons (da‘wa) for gaining the allegiance of the people. Religious knowledge, the ability to render independent rulings (ijtihad), and piety were emphasised as the qualifications of the Imam. In contrast to the beliefs of the Imami Shi‘as, the Zaydi Imams were not considered immune from error and sin (ma‘sum), except for the first three Imams. The list of the Zaydi Imams has never been completely fixed, although many of them were unanimously accepted by their followers. There were, in fact, periods without any Zaydi Imam, and at times, there was more than one Imam. Because of their high requirements for religious learning, the Zaydis often backed ‘Alid pretenders and rulers as summoners(Da‘is)or Imams with restricted status, in distinction from full Imams(sabiqun).

By the 10th century CE, the Zaydis had adopted practically all of the principal doctrines of Mu‘tazili theology, including the unconditional punishment of the unrepentant sinner - a tenet rejected by the Twelvers and the Ismailis. In law, the Zaydis initially relied on the teachings of Zayd b. ‘Ali himself and other ‘Alid authorities. By the end of the 9th century, however, four legal schools had emerged on the basis of the teachings of different Zaydi scholars,

including Imam al-Qasim ibn Ibrahim al-Rassi (d.860 CE), who founded a school of jurisprudence that became prevalent in the Yemen and the Caspian region. In later times, Zaydi law became greatly influenced by the Shafi‘i Sunni school of jurisprudence.

In 864 CE, Hasan b. Zayd, a descendant of Imam Hasan, led the Daylamis in a revolt against the region’s pro-Abbasid ruler and established the first Zaydi state in Tabaristan, in northern Iran. Subsequently, the Daylami Zaydis were divided into two rival factions, the Qasimiyya and the Nasiriyya. There was much antagonism between the two Zaydi communities of northern Iran who often supported different leaders. Matters were further complicated by ethnic differences and the close ties that existed between the Qasimiyya Zaydis and the Zaydis of Yemen. In the course of the 12th century, the Caspian Zaydis lost much of their prominence to the Nizari Ismailis, who had successfully established themselves in northern Iran with their seat at Alamut. Subsequently, the Zaydis were further weakened because of incessant factional quarrels among different pretenders. However, minor ‘Alid dynasties and Zaydi communities survived in northern Iran until the 16th century, when the Zaydis of that region converted to Twelver Shi‘isim under the Safavids. Henceforth, Zaydi Shi‘ism was confined to Yemen.

In Yemen, the Zaydi Imamate was founded in 897 CE by Yahya b. Husayn al-Hadi Ila’l-Haqq (d. 911 CE), a descendant of Hasan and grandson of the jurist Qasim ibn Ibrahim al-Rassi. With the help of the local tribes, he established himself in northern Yemen, which remained the stronghold of Zaydi Shi‘ism in South Arabia. Al-Hadi’s legal teachings provided the foundation of the Hadawiyya legal school, which became authoritative in parts of the Caspian Zaydi community while serving as the only recognised legal school in the Yemen. The descendants of al-Hadi eventually quarreled among themselves and failed to be acknowledged as Imams, thus undermining Zaydi rule in the Yemen. In the 11th century, the Yemeni Zaydis experienced further problems because of schismatic movements in their community.

The Zaydi Imamate was briefly restored in the Yemen by Ahmad b. Sulayman al-Mutawakkil (1138-1171 CE), who promoted Zaydi unity. The Zaydi Imamate prevailed in the Yemen

even after the occupation of South Arabia by the Sunni Ayyubids in 1174 CE, although the power of the Imams was now considerably restricted. The Yemeni Zaydis were at times obliged to develop better relations with the Sunnis against their own doctrines. For example, al-Mu‘ayyad Bi’llah Yahya ibn Hamza (1328-1346 CE) praised the early Caliphs among the Companions of the Prophet as deserving equal respect to Imam ‘Ali. In later centuries, as the Zaydi Imams extended their rule to the predominantly Sunni lowlands of Yemen, the Zaydis attempted to achieve a certain doctrinal rapport with their Sunni subjects. On the other hand, the Yemeni Zaydis maintained their traditional hostility toward the Sufis, even though a Zaydi school of Sufism was founded in Yemen in the 14th century. The Zaydis also had prolonged conflicts with the Yemeni Ismailis and wrote numerous polemical treatises in refutation of Ismaili doctrines.

The final phase of the Zaydi Imamate in Yemen started with al-Mansur Bi’llah al-Qasim ibn Muhammad (1597-1620 CE), founder of the Qasimi dynasty of Imams who ruled over much of the Yemen until modern times. The city of San’a served as the capital of an independent Zaydi state and Imamate for more than two centuries until 1872, when Yemen became an Ottoman province for a second time. The later Qasimi-Zaydi Imams ruled over Yemen on a purely dynastic basis until 1962, although they still claimed the title of Imam.

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