

Chapter XXXVII

POLITICAL THEORY OF THE SHĪ'ITES

The death of the Prophet of Islam ushered in an era which is known as the period of the Orthodox Caliphate (11–41/632–661).

The supporters of 'Ali, the fourth Caliph in the chronological order (35–41/656–661), were known as the Shī'ah which literally means a faction, a supporting group in the sense that they supported 'Ali's claim to succession after the death of the Prophet, both as a temporal ruler and a religious leader.

It may be stated authoritatively that 'Ali's claim to the Caliphate was not regarded by his supporters and adherents as a political ambition: on the contrary, it was considered that he had been ordained by Providence to succeed the Prophet and that the Prophet himself had placed the question of succession beyond any doubt by his testament, as it were, at Ghadir al-Khumm.¹

During the Caliphate of 'Uthmān, ibn Sabā' of Yemen, who had settled ultimately in Egypt, openly preached that the first three Caliphs were usurpers as distinguished from 'Ali who was divinely ordained to succeed the Prophet as his executor or plenipotentiary (*waṣī*). The extreme Shī'ites (Ghulāh) believed that the Prophet himself was reincarnated in the form of 'Ali and "that the divine spirit which dwells in every prophet was transferred at Muḥammad's death to 'Ali and from 'Ali to his descendants who succeeded him in the Imāmate."

It would be pointless, so far as we are concerned, to assess and evaluate the truth of the claim made by the Shī'ites that 'Ali had been designated as the Prophet's successor by the Prophet himself in accordance with the command of God, but it is necessary to point out that the Shī'ites, whether holding moderate or extreme views, refused, as it were, from the very beginning to concede that the *ijmā'* has any authority to confer on any person the right to govern a Muslim State. They maintained that at all times a living descendant of 'Ali, whether concealed (*mastūr*) or unconcealed, demands and receives allegiance from the Muslims and is in point of fact the only rightful Caliph (temporal ruler) and Imām (religious leader) of the Islamic peoples.

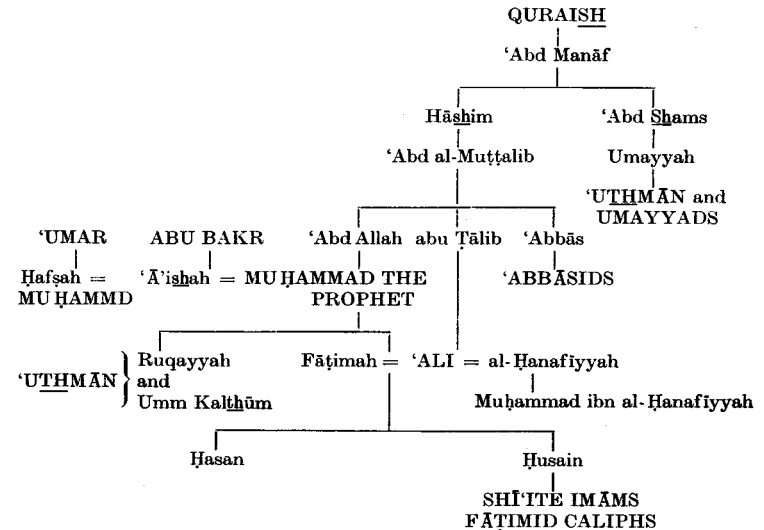
It may perhaps be added that the term Shī'ah was invested with all its dogmatic connotations after the coming into power of the 'Abbāsids. In the beginning the word only meant a group which was in favour of the succession of 'Ali to the Caliphate.

With the rise of the Umayyads the pure Arabs found greater favour with the rulers than the clients of the subject races. This policy which, most probably,

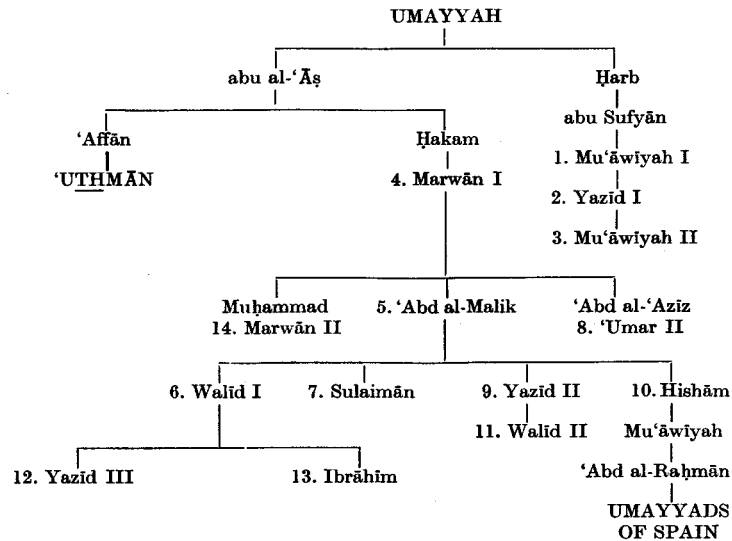
had been initiated by the third Caliph, no doubt, for justifiable reasons, would not have proved disastrous in itself, if Yazid had not perpetrated the horrible deeds which are known as the Tragedy of Karbala. The old rivalry of the Umayyads and the Hāshimites, which had remained subdued during the life-time of the Prophet, now manifested itself in many ways.

All these factors led to what is known as the 'Abbāsīd propaganda carried on in collaboration with the Shī'ites in the name of Hāshim who was acceptable both to the supporters of 'Ali and the descendants of 'Abbās as against the Umayyads who had taken possession of the State and were living in luxury, while their more celebrated Quraish brethren were forced to act merely as spectators of the splendour of the rival branch.

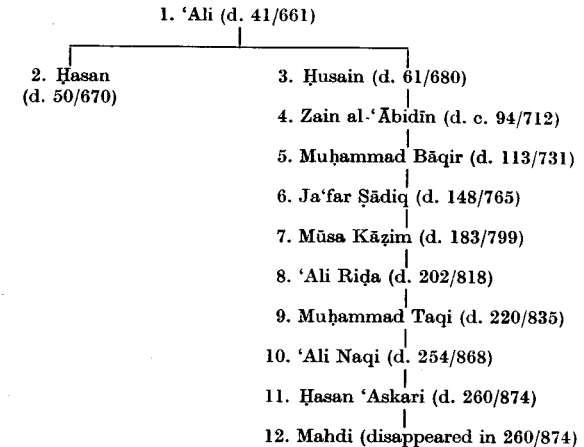
The relationship of the Hāshimites and the 'Alids with the Umayyads would appear from the following genealogical tables:



¹ "A spring between Makkah and al-Madinah where the Shī'ite tradition asserts the Prophet declared, 'Whomsoever I am lord of, his lord is 'Ali also.'" Ibn Sa'd, Vol. V., p. 235; Mas'ūdi, *Tanbih*, pp. 255–56; Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, p. 471, note 1.



The Orthodox Shī'ites (*Ithna 'Ashariyyah*), as contra-distinguished from other sects who were either extremists in their beliefs or had made a drastic departure from the tenets of their orthodox brethren, believed that the Imāmate had descended from Muḥammad, the Prophet, to 'Ali and his descendants according to the table given below:



The 'Abbāsīd propaganda ultimately bore fruit and the House of 'Abbās, mainly with the help of the Iranians who had flocked to abu Muslim, an Iranian leader of great courage and patriotic fervour, succeeded in their machinations. The Umayyads were overthrown: Marwān the last Caliph was slain on the 15th of Dh. H. 132/5th of August 750, followed by a general massacre of the members of the Royal House of the Umayyads, and Saffah ascended the throne in 132/750.

After the revolution had become an accomplished fact, the Shī'ites who had supported the 'Abbāsīd cause with such sincerity were bitterly disillusioned and sadly disappointed: they were under the impression that a member of the House of 'Ali would be enthroned. The treacherous murder of abu Muslim (138/755) further convinced the Shī'ites, if such conviction was needed, that their 'Abbāsīd cousins were no less hostile to them and their claim than the Umayyads, and it was during this period of bitter frustration, disappointment, and stark disillusionment that the term "Shī'ah" was invested with its basic political and religious connotations.

The Shī'ites claimed that the House of 'Abbās had usurped the Caliphate as the Umayyads and the three Orthodox Caliphs had done. They contended that, although *de facto* sovereignty vested in the 'Abbāsīds, legal sovereignty remained with the descendants of 'Ali who were divinely ordained to be the temporal and religious leaders of the Islamic peoples.

According to the Shī'ite traditions, the twelfth Imām, namely, Mahdi (the expected one), was born in Sāmarra in 255 or 256/868 or 869. At the time of the death of his father he would have been only four or five years of age. He was designated as Imām a few days before the death of his father and very soon after his death he disappeared or went into concealment which consists of two periods, short (*sughra*) and long (*kubra*). For a period of seventy years he was represented by four *wakīls* (agents or advocates), namely, 'Uthman ibn Sa'īd, abu Ja'far, abu al-Qāsim, and abu al-Ḥasan. The last named refused to nominate an agent on his behalf and died saying: "Now the matter is with God." Accordingly, the period when the hidden Imām was represented by the *wakīls* is known as the lesser concealment and this period extended to 329/940. Since that time the Shī'ite Mahdi or the hidden Imām has been in "the great concealment" and he is expected to return near the end of time.

The political theories of the Orthodox Shī'ites depend on three fundamental precepts, namely, (1) the divine right of the descendants of 'Ali to succeed to the Imāmate, (2) the sinlessness of all the Imāms, and (3) the return of Mahdi, the twelfth Imām.

The first precept means that democratic election, i. e., consent of the people, or any other method of choosing successor to the Prophet Muḥammad is mani-

festly and palpably wrong and, as a matter of fact, sinful. Sovereignty, with all responsibilities that it entails for its holder as a temporal ruler and duties that it entails for him as a religious chief, is a gift from God which is conferred only on those who have descended from Muhammad through 'Ali and Fāṭimah. (The descendants of 'Ali not born of Fāṭimah have no right to the Caliphate or the Imāmate.) The Shī'ite theologians obviously contend that the divine right of the Imām to become the Commander of the Faithful depends on the word of God as conveyed by the Prophet to 'Ali and by 'Ali to his descendants.

It has been conjectured, however, that the theory of the divine right of the Imāms, which was analogous to the theory of the divine right of kings, was evolved and developed by the Persian supporters of the House of 'Ali who had witnessed the rise and fall of great empires wherein the emperors more often than not laid claims to Godhead.

In all great Eastern empires of the remote past the kings at some time or another claimed to be gods or semi-gods at least, perhaps in order to stabilize the State and to keep the subject races unified through the worship of the sovereign. When we consider that the Shī'ite theologians and historians have accepted it as a fact that a daughter of the last Sāsānian King of Persia was married to Ḥusain (all Imāms being descendants from her), it becomes easy enough to appreciate the position of the Persian adherents of 'Ali in relation to the Caliphate and the Imāmate. The fact that many of the Shī'ah sects believed in the Godhead of 'Ali further lends support to the theory that the concept of the divine right of the Imāms to succeed the Prophet had infiltrated into Arabia through Persian channels.

Once we accept that the Imāms are divinely ordained to rule the Faithful, we must accept the fact that the State as envisaged by the Shī'ite theologians is a theocracy in the most rigid sense of the word, in which the ruler—a temporal head as well as religious chief—cannot be deposed even if he palpably commits sins and crimes of a most serious nature. This is the logical conclusion of the acceptance of the theory of divine right because the supporters of this theory would contend that "what our limited knowledge visualizes as a crime or as a sin is really virtue." We, with our limited knowledge and understanding, cannot appreciate or assess the significance of an act of the Imām. This logical conclusion was accepted by the Ismā'īlites specifically and categorically, although the Orthodox Shī'ites contented themselves with saying that it is not possible for the Imām to commit a sin or a crime.

The concept of sinlessness is a logical corollary of the acceptance of the first precept.

It would follow, therefore, that in theocracy as envisaged by the Shī'ites, the Caliph who is also the Imām can neither be deposed nor interfered with in any matter of administrative or religious nature. From the purely political point of view, this theocratic State has elements of stability and strength which are peculiarly its own, but it may not appeal to those who believe that

sovereignty vests really in the people ultimately and that the negation of the right to depose, irrespective of the fact whether the ruler is just or unjust and cruel, is contrary to all principles of equity and justice inherent in all constitution-making.

The Shī'ite theologians may reply that the Imām, being divinely ordained, is incapable of committing a sin or crime and will exercise his authority in a benevolent manner, and although he will be sovereign in every sense of the word, he will be bound by the restrictions imposed upon him by the Qur'ān, the traditions of the Prophet as narrated by the Imāms, and the examples of the Imāms' lives.

The belief that the twelfth Imām, Mahdi, is bound to return is most significant in the sense that the Shī'ite theologians are in a position to encourage their adherents whenever they are passing through dangerous or chaotic periods and ask them to stand fast since the advent of the Mahdi will be the end of all tyranny, despotism, suffering, misery, wretchedness, and sinfulness and the beginning of a new era of prosperity, bliss, happiness, and ecstasy never experienced before by humanity.

It is obvious that temporal and religious problems are to be solved during the concealment of the twelfth Imām. The ideal theocratic Shī'ite State envisages the existence of righteous, erudite, competent, learned, and virtuous persons who administer the Law and solve all theological problems and juristic questions by *ijtihād* (effort). These competent persons are known as *mujtahids* and are supposed to derive their wisdom and acumen from the representatives of the hidden Imām who is in contact with them.

The *mujtahids* have always exercised very great influence in the Shī'ite States and have been considered to be the Caliphs of the Imām. It is of course possible to visualize periods when wide powers are misused and unlimited authority is converted into tyranny. Human nature is frail and whenever human beings are vested with unlimited powers, they are apt to misuse them at some time or other.

It may be stated, therefore, that the Shī'ites envisaged their ideal State as a rigidly theocratic one, with the concealed Imām as the arbiter of the destinies of the Faithful working out a pattern of society through the *mujtahids*, who derived their power to adjudicate from the Imām himself or his representatives with whom they are in contact. All persons, sovereigns, rulers and pontiffs, wherever they may be, are usurpers if they do not derive their right to rule from the commands of the Imām or from his representatives.

The chaotic conditions which prevail will be set right by the advent or emergence of the Mahdi who will establish this ideal theocratic State, holding sway over the whole world and laying the law for all creatures who inhabit it.

POLITICAL THEORY OF THE ISMĀ'ILITES

The sixth Imām of the Shi'ites, namely, Imām Ja'far Ṣādiq (the Truthful) is justly considered to be one of the greatest authorities on Law and Tradition. He is regarded as one of the most celebrated of the jurists. He instructed some of the greatest Traditionists known to the Muslim peoples and is also known as the originator or at least the greatest exponent of the occult science known as *ja'far*.

Curiously enough, it was during his life-time that the Shi'ite world was torn asunder and there emerged upon the scene a new group or sect of the Shi'ites, known by many names, for example, the Ismā'ilites, the Seveners, the Carmathians, Haft Imāmiyyah, and the Malāhidah.

The Carmathian sect is not to be confused with the Ismā'ilites, as the latest research has established beyond any doubt: it is the term "Ismā'ilite" which is indicative of the true origin of the sect, other appellations being either misleading or based on hostility to this sect in general and to Orthodox Shi'ites in particular.

From the tangle of conflicting evidence, contradictory claims, and inconsistent theories, the basic facts relating to the origin of this sect appear as follows:

It is admitted by all concerned that Imām Ja'far died in 148/765. Before his death he had designated his son Ismā'il to be his successor and the rightful Imām. Now this Ismā'il died some time between the year 136/753 and 146/763: it is clear that he could not have died before 136/754—the year that the 'Abbāsīd Caliph, Maṣū'ir, ascended the throne—because we find it stated on unimpeachable authority that the fact of his death was reported to the Caliph, who, obviously, watched the movements of the Shi'ite Imāms carefully and sometimes with great anxiety, because almost all the movements which aimed at the overthrow of the 'Abbāsīd Caliphate used the name of the reigning Shi'ite Imām as a cloak. The 'Abbāsīd Caliphs, therefore, even when convinced that Imāms themselves were not in any way associated with the movement in question, very carefully kept them under State observation. According to the Shi'ites, they were, for all practical purposes, prisoners of State, and their movements were restricted by "political expediency," the seriousness or the significance of which was determined by the corresponding seriousness of the revolt or the movement which gave birth to it.

Again, this is admitted by all concerned that before the death of Ismā'il, Imām Ja'far had revoked the authority of succession in the case of Ismā'il and had in his place designated Imām Mūsa Kāzīm as his rightful successor and Imām of the Shi'ites.

The reasons, which led the Imām to take this step which caused the Shi'ite community to be torn asunder and divided into hostile groups, cannot be determined at this stage. The Orthodox Shi'ites—and Sunni authorities are not lacking in support thereof—assert that Imām Ismā'il was, one unfortunate

day, found drinking wine and thus committing an action which is admittedly a sin. Imām Ja'far—so the story goes—thereupon repudiated Ismā'il and designated his brother as his successor.

This repudiation of sanction or authority, technically known as *naṣṣ*, was not and could not be accepted by some of the Shi'ites because it negated and falsified the fundamental postulates of the Shi'ites in general.

Those who would not accept this repudiation and revocation argue as follows:

The sinlessness of the Imām is an established fact. Ismā'il was declared to be the Imām-Designate by Ja'far. He, therefore, was incapable of committing any sin or perpetrating any crime. The allegation that he was found drinking wine was either incorrect or related to one of those mysterious acts of the Imām-Designate the significance of which is known to him only. Since he was incapable of committing a sin, his drinking must have been a cloak for some other activity: in other words, drinking was an appearance (*zāhir*), the reality (*bā'in*) of which was known only to the Imām or to those in whom he confided.

The supporters of Ismā'il also contend that he was appointed Imām-Designate by Imām Ja'far in accordance with divine command. God is infallible. It is impossible to conceive that God was not aware that Ismā'il one day would be found drinking. If, therefore, he allowed Ismā'il to be declared as the successor of Imām Ja'far, the story that Ismā'il was found drinking wine must either be untrue or must be considered and treated as an act innocent in itself, the significance of which is known only to God, the Imām, and his successor. They contend that it was quite possible that the wine-drinking of Ismā'il may have been considered expedient by God and since all actions of the Imām flow from God, no action of Ismā'il, however sinful it may have appeared, can be considered to be unjustified and condemned, since it is in fact an act performed as ordained by Providence. During the life-time of Imām Ja'far the controversy and the ferment consequent upon the revocation of authority remained subdued, but as soon as he died the supporters of Ismā'il came forward and contested the succession of Imām Mūsa Kāzīm. Since Ismā'il had died during the life-time of his father, it was contended that the *naṣṣ* (sanction, authority) had been transferred from Ismā'il to his son Muḥammad who had from then on become the rightful Imām, the spiritual and temporal leader of the Shi'ites and the rightful ruler of all territorial possessions.

There were some who believed that Ismā'il had not really died and was the last rightful Imām, but they were in a minority. Slowly but steadily the supporters of Muḥammad the son of Ismā'il gained ascendancy and laid the foundation of the Ismā'ili sect which culminated in the establishment of one of the greatest Muslim empires of the East—the Empire of the Fāṭimids of Egypt.

De Goeje and Dozy have it "that a certain 'Abd Allah b. Maimūn, an

occultist (*qaddāh*) by profession and a Persian by race," was inspired by religious fervour, political ambition, and inveterate hatred against the "Arabs and Islam," to "bind together in one association the conquered and the conquerors; to combine in one secret society, wherein there should be several grades of indication, the free-thinkers who saw in religion only a curb for the common people and the bigots of all sects; to make use of the believers to bring about the reign of the unbelievers and of the conquerors to overthrow the empire which they had themselves founded; to form for himself, in short, a party, numerous, compact, and schooled to obedience, which, when the moment was come, would give the throne, if not to himself, at least to his descendants: such was the dominant idea of 'Abd Allah b. Maimūn, an idea which, grotesque and audacious though it was, he realized with astonishing tact, incomparable skill, and a profound knowledge of the human heart."

There is a very significant old adage that if you fling sufficient mud some is bound to stick. This is exactly what happened in the case of Maimūn and his son 'Abd Allah. The Orientalists—nay even such an erudite Iranian scholar as Muḥammad Qazwīni, the editor of *Tārīkh-i Jahān-Gusha* by 'Aṭa Malik Juwaini—were misled by the voluminous 'Abbāsīd propaganda, hostile commentary of the Orthodox Shī'ites, and the specious argument of those opposed to the Ismā'ilites, into thinking that Maimūn and his son 'Abd Allah were opposed to the tenets of Islam or were inspired by the hatred for the Arabs. As a matter of fact, as the latest research has established beyond any doubt, Maimūn was the name adopted by Imām Muḥammad when he went into concealment (*ghaibah*). In other words, during the period of concealment those who were in his confidence knew Imām Muḥammad to be Maimūn.

No doubt, this is a daring postulate but, once we accept it, all conflicts are resolved, all inconsistencies removed, and all confusions laid to rest. It is quite evident that when the Orthodox Shī'ites assert that Maimūn was a narrator of traditions under Imām Bāqir and Imām Ja'far, they are speaking the literal truth. So are the Ismā'ilites when they say that Maimūn and his son 'Abd Allah were the staunchest supporters of the Ismā'ilite cause. It is clear that the Orthodox Shī'ites were not taken into confidence by the supporters of Imām Muḥammad when he was in concealment and were, therefore, unable to appreciate that Maimūn and Muḥammad are one and the same person. By accepting this postulate we are also in a position to appreciate and understand the attitude adopted by the 'Abbāsīd Caliphs in relation to both Maimūn and his son 'Abd Allah. It is quite likely that some of the spies of the 'Abbāsīds might have brought to the notice of the Caliph that Maimūn was the concealed Imām; and political expediency might have forbidden the broadcasting of this highly significant and equally dangerous information.

The stream of invectives poured upon the head of Maimūn and his son 'Abd Allah by the 'Abbāsīd Caliphs, the Orthodox Shī'ites, and the Sunni historians in general, is in itself significant and tends to support the theory

that both these persons were not only supporters of the Ismā'ilites' cause but were the pivots and props thereof.

After the death of Ja'far, Muḥammad went into concealment adopting the name of Maimūn. He spent some time at Kūfah and Rayy. The 'Abbāsīd Caliph being informed that Muḥammad was laying the foundation of a powerful organization even in concealment and sending out preachers to different parts of Persia made some efforts to seize him, but it would appear that either these efforts were half-hearted or they failed.

Ultimately, 'Abd Allah al-Mahdi in direct line of descent from Muḥammad the son of Ismā'il succeeded in laying the foundation of an enviable empire in Egypt, the rulers of which are known to history as the Fātimīds or the descendants of Fātimah through 'Ali.

At this juncture it is perhaps expedient to state in the most explicit terms that the Carmathians were not associated with the Ismā'ilites, nor were they identical with them as it is sometimes wrongly supposed.

Hollister has ascertained their position as follows. "We find the word Carmathian used: (1) as an equivalent for Ismā'ilis in general; (2) for the dissident groups of Ismā'ilites who joined in the invasion of Syria and came very close to capturing Damascus and establishing there a Fātimīd Kingdom somewhat earlier than that established in North Africa; (3) for the followers of Ḥamdān Qarmaṭ and 'Abdān, his brother-in-law, who seceded from the Ismā'ilis; and (4) for the Qarmaṭians of Bahrain. The more recent studies, supported by Ismā'ilite authorities, have made it clear that only this last group is really entitled to the name Qarmaṭian (Carmathian)."

The Fātimīd Caliphs (297-567/909-1171), broadly speaking, tried to establish a theocratic State and were on the whole just rulers and efficient administrators. One of them, al-Ḥākim, however, claimed divinity for himself. In other words, he not only claimed to be the Imām, but further contended that the divine light had entered his body so that he had become identical with the Creator. His claim was laughed out of Egypt, but the Druzes of Lebanon up to this day believe in his divinity and look forward to the return of Lord Ḥākim. They do not believe that he was actually murdered and are confident that he merely disappeared as an Imām often does, and would reappear in due course as the herald of a new era of prosperity, righteousness, and godliness on the earth.

Amazingly enough the Ismā'ilites were destined to be split again into two powerful groups. Al-Mustansir died in 428/1036 and the Imāmate should have been transferred to his eldest son Nizār who, his supporters claimed, had been properly designated as Imām. However, he was not in Cairo when his father died, and before he could take effective steps his brother al-Musta'li ascended the throne and Nizār was faced with a *fait accompli*.

Nizār never succeeded to the throne, but he found a very staunch supporter in Ḥasan Ṣabbāh who had come to Persia during the reign of al-Mustansir. This Ḥasan Ṣabbāh was really an amazing person, learned, erudite, ambitious,

outwardly pious, wily, and blessed with administrative ability and infinite capacity to work.

In order to further his own ends, he supported the cause of Nizār as the rightful Imām and the ruler of the Islamic world, and in his name took possession of many fortresses in Persia including the famous Alamūt (the Eagle's Nest) which in due course of time became the centre of Ḥasan's activities.

The movement initiated by Ḥasan is known as *Da'wat-i Jadīd* or New Propaganda. The Nizāri Imāms of Alamūt, beginning with Ḥasan Ṣabbāh, held sway in certain parts of Persia until the last Imām **Khurshāh** was killed by the Mongols in the seventh/thirteenth century. The Nizāri branch of the Ismā'ilites recognizes the **Agha Khān** as its head and their members are known in the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent as **Khojahs**. The adherents of Musta'li are known as Bohras.

According to the Ismā'ilites as to the Orthodox Shi'ites, the only rightful State is a theocratic one which has as its Head the Imām who, as we have already emphasized, is divinely ordained to hold his office.

The Imām or the Head of the State never becomes *functus officio* in the sense that when he is concealed his representatives become operative and spread the light. As a matter of fact, both the sects, the Twelvers and the Ismā'ilites, believe in the continuity of the office of the Imām. There can be no vacuum so far as the performance of the functions pertaining to the Imāmate is concerned. There may be and sometimes is a long period between the death of one prophet and the birth of another, but during this period the Imām continues to perform his functions in the light of revelation.

It is believed that every Prophet had an Imām to whom he revealed the truth. Technically, the Prophet is called *nātiq* and the Imām as *sāmit*.

It is admitted that, although revelation is only vouchsafed to the prophet, it is interpreted and enforced by the Imām, since the esoteric meanings of the revelation are known to him alone. During the Fātimid period, 'Ali, the fourth Caliph, was given the place of *asās* or the foundation of the Imāmate and was, thus, raised to a position above all other Imāms.

In the theocratic State envisaged by the Ismā'ilites every Imām has a chief minister who is termed *Bāb* (the door, the gate). He is the intermediary between the Imām and the inner circle of preachers. All information sought to be conveyed to the Imām is conveyed through the *Bāb* and all orders passed by the Imām are communicated to the persons concerned by the same *Bāb*. It is on record that Ḥasan Ṣabbāh claimed that he had been refused permission to see the Imām on account of the fact that Badr, the *Bāb*, and the minister of Mustanşir would not allow him to do so.

The Ismā'ilite creed emphasizes the importance of cycles. Obviously, one source of revelation is not sufficient to lead humanity to the true path. Therefore, there have been cycles of revelation, each introduced by a prophet or *nātiq* succeeded by six Imāms. The seventh initiates a new cycle and really ranks as a prophet.

This is the reason why Ismā'il is held in such reverence by the Ismā'ilites: he completes the cycle which began with the Prophet Muhammad and introduces a new one.

Salvation of mankind depends upon recognizing the basic principle that one must identify the Imām and take the oath of allegiance (*bai'ah*) to him. Those who do not recognize the Imām remain in a state of sin.

It has been mentioned that the Shi'ites believe in the doctrine of the sinlessness of the Imām. It has also been stated that Ismā'ilites, more than any other Shi'ite sect, accept unflinchingly the conclusions which are attendant upon this belief. In other words, if it be proved beyond any shadow of doubt by unimpeachable evidence that Ismā'il was observed drinking wine, the Ismā'ilites would argue that since the Imām is incapable of committing a sin his wine-drinking must be considered to be an act which is capable of an esoteric interpretation (*tā'wīl*).

As a matter of fact, the basis of the Ismā'ilite creed, as it crystallized under Fātimids of Egypt, is the belief that there are two aspects of knowledge, namely, the apparent or manifest (*ẓāhir*) and the esoteric or inner (*bā'in*). The *ẓāhir* of the Qur'ān is *tanzīl* while the *bā'in* is *tā'wīl*. The esoteric meaning is known to the Prophet who imparts knowledge to his Imām. The Imām then spreads the light through his representatives: "every person who wishes to belong to the *Da'wat* enters into covenant with him (the Imām), on behalf of God. This is called *bai'ah*. Man and woman must both take a like oath in a ceremony known as *mīthāq*. They must quite justly oppose everything that is unlawful . . . and keep secret those things and the religious knowledge which are entrusted to them. Obedience to all the dictates of religion is the most important duty of the Faithful. Salvation can be attained only through obedience completed in word, action, desire, and thought."

Whereas the Sunnis and the Twelvers (*Ithna 'Ashariyyah*) have commentaries relating to the meaning of the Qur'ān, the Ismā'ilites do not and cannot possess any such works.

Ivanow has it that in Ismā'ilism there is no such thing as a work of *Tafsīr* (commentary on the Qur'ān). It would appear that the passages which seem obscure or ambiguous can only be referred to the Imām and whoever has the good fortune to learn the esoteric meaning from the Imām or his representatives is bound to keep such information confidential and secret on account of the oath of allegiance taken by him.

All subjects of a theocratic State, as envisaged by the Ismā'ilites, therefore, are initiated into the mysteries of religion in accordance with their intelligence, capacity, integrity, and loyalty. It is needless to add that if a subject of this theocratic State breaks the oath of allegiance and becomes a convert to any other religion, he is severely punished (provided he is captured).

Until the Fātimid regime came into power the Ismā'ilites, like the other Shi'ite sects, were anxiously waiting for the advent of the Mahdi who would bring peace and prosperity to the world. After the establishment of the Fātimids,

the conception of a personal Mahdi as *al-qā'im* was changed. Every Caliph of the Fāṭimid dynasty was named *al-qā'im* and thus "the idea of Mahdi became merged, so to speak, in the Imāmate, in the dynasty whose mission comes to include the objects which the Mahdi was to effect, if not under an Imām, then under one of his successors."

The theocratic State of the Ismā'ilites enjoins upon all the subjects to wage a holy war (*jihād*) against the people "who turn away from religion." The duty to wage war is obligatory, but it is restricted by an important condition: it can be justified only under the guidance either of the Imām or of his accredited representative.

All subjects of this theocratic State believed in the expediency of dissimulation (*taqīyyah*) although its necessity was reduced almost to nothingness during the regime of the Fāṭimids. Still *taqīyyah* is an accepted fact and whenever the Imām is in concealment his disciples are obliged to practise it so that they may come to no harm. Before the Fāṭimid regime even the Imāms themselves practised *taqīyyah*, according to authentic evidence endorsed by the Ismā'ilites.

It has been mentioned that the sect of the Twelve as well as the Ismā'ilites believe that the only rightful ruler of all territorial possessions of the world is the Imām. Since at a given moment a theocratic Ismā'ilite State may or may not exist, it is the duty of all Ismā'ilites to encourage the preaching of their creed. The Fāṭimids paid great attention to the intellectual equipment of a preacher (*dā'i*). The *dā'i* was supposed to answer any question that a pupil or an opponent might ask. He was, therefore, made to study jurisprudence, all branches of Tradition, the philosophical interpretation of the Qur'ān, *tā'wīl* or allegorical meanings, and the art of controversy and dialectics.

The theocratic State of the Ismā'ilites established under the Fāṭimids encouraged the acquisition of knowledge. In a way it aimed at rationalization of the precepts of religion. It was by arousing the curiosity of the people that the Ismā'ili preachers ultimately succeeded in winning them over. It is paradoxical, indeed, that the Ismā'ilites, who believed that mere knowledge is not sufficient for the achievement of salvation and that one has to recognize an Imām and follow him unstintedly in all matters, established seats of learning, schools and universities where the students were encouraged to think for themselves. The Azhar University of Cairo was built by the Fāṭimids and has continued since then to be regarded as the outstanding educational institution in the entire Muslim world.

The Fāṭimids also established observatories and libraries and these institutions were accessible to all peoples and classes irrespective of religion or creed. Public gatherings were addressed by learned men in robes which may be regarded as forerunners of the academic gowns worn by professors today. All costs pertaining to these institutions were borne by the Government and for the teaching of different sciences learned professors were imported from Spain and from farthest parts of Asia.

It may be said, therefore, that a theocratic State, rigid in its framework and immutable in its convictions, gave birth to rational movements aimed at the correlation of religious precepts with scientific and philosophic truths as known at the time. It became the harbinger of rational thinking, and by encouraging the pursuit of knowledge it gave to learning and letters a new impetus. If we believe Nāṣir Khusrau, and we have no reason to disbelieve him, the State which was established by the Fāṭimids had become the centre of all learning and knowledge and from it radiated waves and movements towards different parts of the Muslim world encouraging others to pursue knowledge, to think for themselves, and to ponder over religious matters in the light of reason.

It is an amazing coincidence of history that a theocratic State should give birth to rational thought and should encourage the study of philosophy even when it must have been aware that learning and education tend to produce a collective mental state which is opposed to the rigidity of a truly theocratic State. The Fāṭimids deserve all honour, therefore, for advancing the cause of knowledge even with the lurking suspicion that it may end in the destruction of their own State and sealing their own doom.

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