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Chapter XXXVII

POLITICAL THEORY OF THE SHI'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 Shi'ites 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 Qudsir al-Khumm.1

During the Caliphate of 'Uthman, ibnSa'ab 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 (wasi). The extreme Shi'ites (Gilb) 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 Muhammad's death to 'Ali and from 'Ali to his descendants who succeeded him in the Imamate.2

It would be pointless, so far as we are concerned, to assess and evaluate the truth of the claim made by the Shi'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 Shi'ites, whether holding moderate or extreme views, refused, as it were, from the very beginning to concede that the imam 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 (massigne) or unconcealed, demands and receives allegiance from the Muslims and is in point of fact the only rightful Caliph (temporal ruler) and Imam (religious leader) of the Islamic peoples.

It may perhaps be added that the term Shi'ah was invoked with all its dogmatic connotations after the coming into power of the Abbassids. 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,
The 'Abbāsid propaganda ultimately bore fruit and the House of 'Abbāsids, mainly with the help of the Iranians who had deserted 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 the 2nd month of 756/856th of August 750, followed by a general massacre of the members of the Royal House of the Umayyads, and Safi al-Aswāq ascended the throne in 132/750.

After the revolution had become an accomplished fact the Shī'ītes who had supported the 'Abbāsid 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 'Abbāsid cause was 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'ite' was invested with its basic political and religious connotations.

The Shī'ites claimed that the House of 'Abbāsids had usurped the Caliphate as the Umayyads and the three Orthodox Caliphs had done. They contended that, although de facto sovereignty vested in the 'Abbāsids, legal sovereignty remained with the descendants of 'Ali who were divinely ordained to be the temporal and religious leaders of the Islamic peoples.
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fently 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 Fatimah. (The descendants of ‘Ali not born of Fatimah have no right to the Caliphate or the Imamate.) The Shī‘ite theologians obviously contend that the divine right of the Imamate 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 Imamate, 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 claim 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 Sassanian King of Persia was married to Husain (all Imams being descendants from him), it becomes easy enough to appreciate the position of the Persian adherents of ‘Ali in relation to the Caliphate and the Imamate. The fact that many of the Shī‘a sects believed in the Godhead of ‘Ali further lends support to the theory that the concept of the divine right of the Imamate to succeed the Prophet had infiltrated into Arabia through Persian channels.

Once we accept that the Imams 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 Imam. This logical conclusion was accepted by the Imamiites specifically and categorically, although the Orthodox Shī‘ites contended themselves with saying that it is not possible for the Imam 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 theory as envisaged by the Shī‘ites, the Caliph who is also the Imam 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 Imam, 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’an, the traditions of the Prophet as narrated by the Imams, and the examples of the Imams’ lives.

The belief that the twelfth Imam, 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 constancy never experienced before by humanity.

It is obvious that temporal and religious problems are to be solved during the concealment of the twelfth Imam. 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 ijtihad (effort). These competent persons are known as mujtahids and are supposed to derive their wisdom and acumen from the representatives of the hidden Imam who is in contact with them.

The mujtahids have always exercised great influence in the Shī‘ite States and have been considered to be the Caliphs of the Imam. 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 Imam 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 Imam 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 Imam 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.
day, found drinking wine and thus committing an action which is admittedly a sin. Imam Ja'far—so the story goes—thereupon repudiated Isma'il and designated his brother as his successor.

This repudiation of sanction or authority, technically known as nayz, 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 Issa is an established fact. Isma'il was declared to be the Imam 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 Imam. Designate the significance of which is known only to him. 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 (fikhr), the reality (fihis) of which was known only to the Imam or to those in whom he confided.

The supporters of Isma'il also contend that he was appointed Imam Designate by Imam Ja'far in accordance with divine command. God is infallible. It is impossible to conceive that God was not aware that Isma'il one day would be found drinking. If, therefore, he allowed Isma'il to be declared as the successor of Imam Ja'far, the story that Isma'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 Imam, and his successor. They contend that it was quite possible that the wine-drinking of Isma'il may have been considered expedient by God and since all actions of the Imam flow from God, no action of Isma'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 Imam Ja'far the controversy and the ferment consequent upon the revocation of authority remained sublimed, but as soon as he died the supporters of Isma'il came forward and contested the succession of Imam Musa al Kadhim. Since Isma'il had died during the life-time of his father, it was contended that the nayz (sanction, authority) had been transferred from Isma'il to his son Muhammad who had then on become the rightful Imam, the spiritual and temporal leader of the Shi'ites and the rightful ruler of all territorial possessions.

There were some who believed that Isma'il had not really died and was the last rightful Imam, but they were in a minority. Slowly but steadily the supporters of Muhammed the son of Isma'il gained ascendency and laid the foundation of the Isma'illic sect which culminated in the establishment of one of the greatest Muslim empires of the East—the Empire of the Fatimids of Egypt.

Dr. Goeje and Dasey have it "that a certain 'Abd Allah b. Maimun, an
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that both these persons were not only supporters of the Ismai'iliites' cause but were the pivots and prop of the caliphate.

After the death of the Fatimids, Muhammad went into concealment adopting the name of Maimon. He spent some time at Kufah and Rayy. The Abbasid Caliph was informed that Muhammad 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 those efforts were half-hearted or they failed.

Ultimately, 'Abd Allah al-Mahdi in direct line of descent from Muhammad the son of Isma'il succeeded in laying the foundation of anewish empire in Egypt, the rulers of which are known to history as the Fatimid or the descendants of Fathim through 'Ali.

At this juncture it is perhaps expedient to state in the most explicit terms that the Carmathians were not associated with the Ismai'ilites. Not even their followers are 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 Ismai'ilites in general; (2) for the dissident groups of Ismai'ilites who joined in the invasion of Syria and were very close to capturing Damascus and establishing there a Fatimid Kingdom somewhat earlier than that established in North Africa; (3) for the followers of Isma'il ibn Musa and 'Abbas, his brother-in-law, who seceded from the Isma'ilites; and (4) for the Qarmatians of Bahrain. The more recent studies, supported by Ismai'ilite authorities, have made it clear that only this last group is really entitled to the name Qarmatian (Carmathian)."

The Fatimid Caliphs (297-507/909-1111), broadly speaking, tried to establish a theocratic State and were on the whole just rulers and efficient administrators. One of them, al-Hakim, however, claimed divinity for himself. In other words, he not only claimed to be the Imam, 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 his successor. They do not believe that he was actually murdered and are confident that he merely disappeared as an Imam 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 Ismai'ilites were destined to be split again into two powerful groups. Al-Mustansir died in 428/1036 and the Ismai'ilite should have been transferred to his eldest son Nizar who, his supporters claimed, had been properly designated as Imam. However, he was not in Cairo when his father died, and before he could take effective steps his brother al-Musta'll ascended the throne and Nizar was faced with a fait accompli.

Nizar never succeeded to the throne, but he found a very staunch supporter in Hassan al-Dakhi who had come to Persia during the reign of al-Musta'll. This Hassan al-Dakhi 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 Nizar as the rightful Imam and the ruler of the Islamic world, and in his name took possession of many fortresses in Persia including the famous Alamut (the Eagle’s Nest) which in due course of time became the centre of Hasan’s activities.

The movement initiated by Hassan is known as Da’wati Jafarri or New Propaganda. The Nizari Imams of Alamut, beginning with Hasan Sabbah, held sway in certain parts of Persia until the last Imam Khwarizmshah was killed by the Mongols in the seventh/eighteenth century. The Nizari branch of the Isma’ili’s recognize the Aga Khan as its head and their members are known in the Indo-Pakistani sub-continent as Khojas. The adherents of Musta’ali are known as Bohras.

According to the Isma’ili’s as to the Orthodox Shi’ite, the only rightful Imam is a theocratic one which has as its Head the Imam who, as we have already emphasized, is divinely ordained to hold his office.

The Imam or the Head of the State never becomes functus officio in the sense that when he is succeeded his representatives become operative and spread the light. As a matter of fact, both the sects, the Twelvers and the Isma’ili, believe in the continuity of the office of the Imam. There can be no vacuum so far as the performance of the functions pertaining to the Imamate 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 Imam continues to perform his functions in the light of revelation.

It is believed that every Prophet had an Imam to whom he revealed the truth. Technically, the Prophet is called siddiq and the Imam as siddiq. It is admitted that, although revelation is only vouchsafed to the prophet, it is interpreted and enforced by the Imam, 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 a siddiq or the foundation of the Imamate and was, thus, raised to a position above all other Imams.

In the theocratic State envisaged by the Isma’ili’s every Imam has a chief minister who is termed Bih (the door, the gate). He is the intermediary between the Imam and the inner circle of preachers. All information sought to be conveyed to the Imam is conveyed through the Bih and all orders passed by the Imam are communicated to the person concerned by the same Bih. It is on record that Hassan Sabbah claimed that he had been refused permission to see the Imam on account of the fact that Bahr, the Bih, and the minister of Mustanir would not allow him to do so.

The Isma’ili 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 siddiq succeeded by six Imams. The seventh initiates a new cycle and really ranks as a prophet.
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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 philosophical truths as known at the time. It became the harbinger of rational thinking, and by encouraging the pursuit of knowledge it gave way to learning and letters a new impetus. If we believe Naser Khosrow, and we have no reason to disbelieve him, the State which was established by the Fatimids had become the center 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 amusing 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 Fatimids 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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Chapter XXXVIII

NIZĀM AL-MULK TŪSĪ

Nizām al-Mulk Tūsī was born in 408/1018 and died in 435/1042. He was not only a minister of the Seljūq for the last thirty years of his life, a scholar, and a patron of arts and sciences, but also the founder of the famous University of Nizāmidyn.

He lived in an age which witnessed the lowest degradation of the Caliphate, following its transformation during a period of three centuries, from a democracy into an autocracy and from autocracy into a mere puppetry in the hands of powerful masters. That period also saw the fall of the Ghurid and the Seljūq Empires and the rise of the Mamluks after their victory over the Ghurids in 431/1040, when their nomadic life changed into that of a gigantic empire, extending from the Oxus and the Jazartos to the Bosphorus. It was an age of change and fusion of social and political ideas and institutions, specially in that part of the Islamic world in which Nizām al-Mulk lived and worked. The rise of the Persian element in political power in the early period of the 'Abbasids was followed by a gradual revival of the Persian political institutions under the patronage of the Shirvanshahs, the Ghurids, and the Seljuqs. These institutions in their turn, together with their theoretical foundations, came to be assimilated by Muslim thought. For this assimilation no battle of ideas was ever fought; it came as a process of cultural development in which Nizām al-Mulk stood as one of the representatives of Persian culture, with a bias towards Islamic thought.

Nizām al-Mulk was not really his name. It was a title of honour conferred upon him by his Seljūq master, Alp Arslan, after his appointment as a minister. His name was also 'Ali b. Hāsan, and his father's name was also 'Ali b. Hāsan, who belonged to a family of landowners (dāhīpa) of Rāhi Dun, a small town in the suburb of Tīs where Nizām al-Mulk was born. In the days

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