

## Chapter 37: Political Theory Of The Shiites

The death of the Prophet of Islam ushered 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 – 41/646 – 661), were known as the Shi’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 the Prophet himself had placed the question of succession beyond any doubt by his testament, as it were, at Ghadir al-Khumm.<sup>1</sup>

During the Caliphate of ‘Uthman, ibn Saba’ 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 (Ghulah) 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 Mohammad’s death to ‘Ali and from ‘Ali to his descendants who succeeded him in the Imamate.”

It would be pointless, so far as we are concerned, to access 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 beginning to concede with the *ijma‘* has any authority to confer any person the right to govern a Muslim State. They maintained that at all times a living descendant of ‘Ali, whether concealed (*mastur*) 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 invested with all its dogmatic connotations after the

coming into power of the ‘Abbasids. In the Beginning the word only meant a group of people which were 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 Hashimites, 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 ‘Abbasids propaganda carried on in collaboration with the Shi‘ites in the name of Hashim who was acceptable both to the supporters of ‘Ali and the descendants of ‘Abbas 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 Hashimites and the ‘Alids with the Umayyads would appear from the following genealogical tables.

The ‘Abbasid propaganda ultimately bore fruit and the House of ‘Abbas, 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; Marwan, the last Caliph was slain on the 15th Dh. H. 132/August 5, 750, followed by a general massacre of the members of the Royal House of the Umayyads, and Saffah ascended the throne 132/750.

After the revolution had become an accomplished fact, the Shi‘ites who disillusioned and sadly disappointed, 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 Shi‘ites, if such conviction was needed, that their ‘Abbasid 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 “Shi‘ah” was invested with its basic political and religious connotations.

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

The Orthodox Shi‘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 Imamate had descended from Mohammad, the Prophet, to ‘Ali and his descendants according to the table given below.

According to the Shi‘ite traditions, the 12th Imam, namely, Mehdi (the expected one), was born in

Samarra 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 Imam 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 70 years he was represented by four *wakils* (agents or advocates), namely, ‘Uthman ibn Sa‘id, Abu Ja‘far, Abu al-Qasima and Abu al-Hassan.

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 Imam was represented by the *wakils* is known as the lesser concealment and this period extended to 329/940. Since that time the Shi‘ite Mehdi or the hidden Imam has been in “the great concealment” and he is expected to return near the end of time.

The political theories of the Orthodox Shi‘ites depend on three fundamental precepts, namely, (1) the divine right of the descendants of ‘Ali to succeed to the Imamate, (2) the sinlessness of all the imams, and (3) the return of Mehdi, the 12th Imam.

The first precept means that democratic election, i.e., consent of the people or any other method of choosing a successor to Prophet Mohammad is manifestly 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 Mohammad through ‘Ali and Fatima. (The descendants of ‘Ali not born of Fatima has no right to the Caliphate or the Imamate.) The Shi‘ite theologians obviously contend that the divine right of the Imam 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 Imams, 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 Shi‘ite theologians and historians have accepted it as a fact that a daughter of the last Sassanian King of Persia was married to Hussain (all Imams 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 Imamate. The fact that many of the Shi‘ah sects believed in the Godhead of ‘Ali further lends support to the theory that the concept of the divine right of the Imams to succeed the Prophet and 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 Shi‘ite theologians is a theocracy in the most rigid sense of the word, in which the ruler – temporal head as well as a 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 Isma‘ilites specifically and categorically, although the Orthodox Shi‘ites contented 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 theocracy as envisaged by the Shi‘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 Shi‘ite theologians may reply that the Imam, being divinely ordained, is capable 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 12th Imam, Mehdi, is bound to return is most significant in the sense that the Shi‘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 Mehdi 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 12th Imam. The ideal theocratic Shi‘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 very great influence in the Shi‘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 Shi‘ite envisaged their ideal State as a rigidly theocratic one, with the

concealed Imam as the arbiter of the destines 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 Mehdi 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 Ismailites**

The sixth Imam of the Shi'ites, namely, Imam Ja'far Sadiq (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 also known as the originator or, at least, the greatest exponent of the occult science known as *jafar*.

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 Isma'ilites, as the latest research has established beyond any doubt. It is the term "Isma'ilites" 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.

Form 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 Imam Ja'far died in 148/765. Before his death he had designated his son Isma'il to his successor and the rightful Imam. Now this Isma'il died sometime between the year 136/753 and 146/763. It is clear that he could not have died before 136/754 – the year that the 'Abbasid Caliph, Mansur, 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 Imams carefully and sometimes with great anxiety, because almost all the movements which aimed at the overthrow of the 'Abbasid Caliphate used the name of the reigning Shi'ite Imam as a cloak.

The 'Abbasid Caliphs, therefore, even when convinced that the Imam 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 the 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 Isma'il, Imam Ja'far had revoked the

authority of succession of the case of Isma'il and had in his place Imam Musa Kazim as the rightful successor and Imam of the Shi'ites.

The reasons, which led the Imam 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 Imam Isma'il was, one unfortunate 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 *nass* was not and could not be accepted by some of the Shi'ites because it opposed 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 Imam 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 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 (*zahir*), the reality (*batin*) 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 lifetime of Imam Ja'far, the controversy and the ferment consequent upon the revocation of authority remained subdued, but as soon as he died the supporters of Isma'il came forward and contested the succession of Imam Musa Kazim. Since Isma'il had died during the lifetime of his father, it was contended that the *nass* (sanction, authority) had been transferred from Isma'il to his son Mohammad who had from then on become the rightful Imam, the spiritual and temporal leader of the Shi'ites and the rightful ruler of all territorial possessions.

There are 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 Mohammad, the son of Isma'il gained ascendancy and laid the foundation of the Isma'ili sect which culminated in the establishment of one of the greatest Muslim empires of the East – the Empire of the Fatimids of Egypt.

DeGoeje and Dozy have it “that a certain ‘Abd Allah b. Maimun, an occulist (*qaddah*) by profession and a Persian,” 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. Maimun, 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 Maimun and his son ‘Abd Allah. The Orientalists – nay even such an erudite Iranian scholar as Mohammad Qazwini, the editor of *Tarikh-i Jahan-Gusha* by ‘Ata Malik Juwaini – were misled by the voluminous ‘Abbasid propaganda, hostile commentary of the Orthodox Shi‘ites, and the specious argument of those opposed to the Isma‘ilites, into thinking that Maimun 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, Maimun was the name adopted by Imam Mohammad when he went into concealment (*ghaibah*). In other words, during the period of concealment those who were in his confidence knew Imam Mohammad to be Maimun.

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 Shi‘ites assert that Maimun was a narrator of traditions under Imam Baqir and Imam Ja‘far, they are speaking the literal truth. So are the Isma‘ilites when they say that Maimun and his ‘Abd Allah were the staunchest supporters of the Isma‘ilite cause.

It is clear that the Orthodox Shi‘ites were not taken into confidence by the supporters of Imam Mohammad when he was in concealment and were, therefore, unable to appreciate that Maimun and Mohammad 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 ‘Abbasid Caliphs in relation of both Maimun and his son ‘Abd Allah. It is quite likely that some of the spies of the ‘Abbasids might have brought to the notice of the Caliph that Maimun was the concealed Imam, 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 Maimun and his son ‘Abd Allah by the ‘Abbasid

caliphs, the Orthodox Shi'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 Isma'ilites' cause but were the pivots and props thereof.

After the death of Ja'far, Mohammad went into concealment adopting the name of Maimun. He spent some time at Kufah and Rayy. The 'Abbasid Caliph being informed that Mohammad 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, but it would appear that either these efforts were half-hearted or they failed.

Ultimately, 'Abd Allah al-Mehdi in direct line of descent from Mohammad, the son of Isma'il succeeded in laying the foundation of an enviable empire in Egypt, the rulers of which are known to history as the Fatimids or the descendants of Fatima through 'Ali.

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

The Fatimid 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-Hakam, 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 Druze of Lebanon up to this day believe in his divinity and look forward to the return 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 Earth.

Amazingly enough, the Isma'ilites were destined to be split again into two powerful groups. Al-Mustansir died in 428/1036 and the Imamate 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'li, 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 Sabbah who had come to Persia during the reign of al-Mustansir. This Hassan Sabbah 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 Hassan's activities.

The movement initiated by Hassan is known as *Da'wat-i Jadid* or New Propaganda. The Nizaari Imams of Alamut, beginning with Hassan Sabbah, held sway in certain parts of Persia until the last Imam Khurshah was killed by the Mongols in the seventh/13th century. The Nizari branch of the Isma'ilites recognizes the Agha Khan as its head and their members are known in the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent as Khojas. The adherents of Must'li are known as Bohras.

According to the Isma'ilites as to the Orthodox Shi'ites, the only rightful State 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 of the Head of 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 sects, the 12ers and the Isma'ilites, 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 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 *natiq* and the Imam as *sumit*.

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 Fatimid period, 'Ali, the fourth Caliph, was given the place of *asas* 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'ilites every Imam has a chief minister who is termed *Bab* (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 *Bab* and all orders passed by the Imam are communicated to the persons concerned by the same *Bab*. It is on record that Hassan Sabbah claimed that he had been refused permission to see the Imam on account of the fact that Badr, the *Bab*, and the minister of Mustansir would not allow him to do so.

The Isma'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 revelations, each introduced by a prophet or *natiq* succeeded by six Imams. The seventh initiates a new cycle and really ranks as a prophet.

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

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

It has been mentioned that the Shi‘ites believe in the doctrine of the sinlessness of the Imam. It has also been stated that Isma‘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 Isma‘il was observed drinking wine, the Isma‘ilites would argue that since the Imam is incapable of committing a sin his wine-drinking must be considered to be an act which is capable of an esoteric interpretation (*ta‘wil*).

As a matter of fact, the basis of the Isma‘elite creed, as it crystallized under Fatimids of Egypt, is the belief that there are two aspects of knowledge, namely, the apparent or manifest (*zahir*) and the esoteric or inner (*batin*). The *zahir* of the Qur‘an is *tanzil* while the *batin* is the *ta‘wil*. The exoteric meaning is known to the Prophet who imparts knowledge to his Imam. The Imam then spreads the light through his representatives, “Every person who wishes to belong to the *Da‘wat* enters into covenant with him (the Imam), on behalf of God. This is called *bai‘ah*. Man and woman must both take a like oath in a ceremony known as *mithaq*. 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 12ers (*Ithna ‘Ashariyyah*) have commentaries relating to the meaning of the Qur‘an, the Isma‘ilites do not and cannot possess any such works.

Ivanow has it that in Isma‘ilism there is no such thing as a work of *Tafsir* (commentary on the Qur‘an). It would appear that the passages which seem obscure or ambiguous can only be referred to the Imam and whoever has the good fortune to learn the esoteric meaning from the Imam 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 Isma‘ilites, therefore, are initiated in 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 Fatimid regime came into power the Isma‘ilites, like other Shi‘ite sects, were anxiously waiting for the advent of the Mehdi who would bring peace and prosperity to the world. After the establishment of the Fatimids, the conception of a personal Mehdi as *al-qā’im* was changed. Every Caliph of the Fatimid dynasty was named *al-qā’im* and thus “the idea of Mehdi became merged, so to speak, in the

Imamate, in the dynasty whose mission comes to include the objects which Mehdi was to effect, if not under an Imam, then under one of his successors."

The theocratic state of the Isma'ilites enjoins upon all the subjects to wage a holy war (*jihad*) 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 Imam or of his accredited representative.

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

It has been mentioned that the sect of the 12 as well as the Isma'ilites believe that the only rightful ruler of all territorial possessions of the world is the Imam. Since at a given moment a theocratic Isma'ilite State may or may not exist, it is the duty of all Isma'ilites to encourage the preaching of their creed.

The Fatimids paid great attention to the intellectual equipment of a preacher (*da'i*). The *da'i* was supposed to answer any question that a student or an opponent might ask. He was, therefore, made to study jurisprudence, all branches of Tradition, the philosophical interpretation of the Qur'an, *ta'wil* or allegorical meanings, and the art of controversy and dialectics.

The theocratic State of the Isma'ilites established under the Fatimids 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 Isma'ili preachers ultimately succeeded in winning them over. It is paradoxical, indeed, that the Isma'ilites, who believed that mere knowledge is not sufficient for the achievement of salvation and that one has to recognize an Imam and follow unstinted 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 Fatimids and has continued since then to be regarded as the outstanding educational institution in the entire Muslim world.

The Fatimids 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 the 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 Nasir Khusrau, and

we have no reason to disbelieve him, the State which was established by the Fatimids 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 reason.

It is an amazing co-incidence of history that a theocratic State should give birth to rational thought and should encourage the study of philosophy even 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 their own State and sealing their own doom.

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1. “A spring between Mecca and al-Medina where the Shi‘ite tradition asserts the Prophet declared, ‘Whomsoever I am lord of, his lord is ‘Ali also.’” Ibn Sa‘ad, Vol. 5, p 235; Mas‘udi, Tanbit, pp. 225 – 56; Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, p. 471, note 1.

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