

Chapter 5: Mukhtar al-Thaqafi

Chapter 5: Mukhtār al-Thaqafī, The Enlightened Messianic Activist, The Shī'ite Insurrection as Political Reaction, Reparation and Revenge

In order to explain the transformation that Islām went through since the rise of Shī'ism, Muslim and non-Muslim historians point to two factors derived from the same cause: the political struggle for the Caliphate. The first factor was the political influence of the oligarchy which transformed itself into a timocratic power, a state in which political power increases with the amount of property one owns, through the support of the triumphant majority. The second factor was the political will of a marginalized minority which became a medium of resistance. Depending on the personal inclinations of previous researchers, they argue in favor of one of these two factors. For us, both factors are two aspects of the same cause. For Western research scholars, it is not always easy to accept the idea that in Islām, the relationship between the religion and politics is much closer than it is in the West between the Church and State. It is even more difficult for them to accept that, **in Shī'ism, religion and politics are two aspects of the orthodox development of the same doctrine**, rather than parallel or separate tendencies that revolve around the same sphere but without any effective connection between them.

“Recent studies,” says Bausani, “distinguish more between a political Shī'ism, which included the purely political partisans of 'Alī and his family..., a religious Shī'ism, which included activists impregnated with Gnostic ideas, who were based mostly in Kūfah, in Mesopotamia, and whose main representative ... was the politico-religious agitator al-Mukhtār who took over Kūfah in 685–686. He preached Messianic doctrines and started some very interesting customs like the cult of the vacant throne and so forth” (112–113). As a result of these events, some Orientalists attempted to establish a clear distinction between an “extremist” political Shī'ism, a “moderate” religious Shī'ism, and an “intermediate” Shī'ism. This latter, which shares both political and religious aspects, is at times “extremist” and at others “moderate” according to Bausani's definition of Twelver Shī'ism. It comes as no surprise that, centuries after the birth of Shī'ism, Orientalists seeking support for the “democratic” orientation of Abū Bakr would use this inappropriate division to supposedly distinguish between a political Shī'ism and a religious Shī'ism. [1](#)

The origin and early development of Shi'ite Islam is, to a great extent, a history of divisions, dissensions, and internal quarrels relating to the problem of succession. A considerable number of movements, some of which went from partial or relative dissidence [*inshih'ib*] to outright rupture [*fitnah*], were drawn into the center of this great storm as a result of the violence perpetrated by the political and religious authorities. It must be mentioned, however, that while some of these groups may have reached the state of sects [*furaq*] in the Christian sense of the word, in our view, even this barrier between differences does not produce clear-cut division. On the contrary, under this umbrella, many branches flourished, some longer-lived than others, which developed alongside Shi'ism without breaking the tie, as weak as it may have been, with the Islamic trunk from which they were born.²

In truth, the development of sects--that is, groups which diverge on the basis of important beliefs or practices--is the result of the closer ties established between Shi'ism and the surrounding esoteric traditions. The divergence and conflict between the distinct groups is related to the reaction towards an ocean of doctrinal wealth. The Isma'iliyah,³ for example, have a doctrine which, in many respects, makes them the heirs of the Sabian tradition of Harran which, as is known, was the depository of Hermetic and neo-Pythagorean doctrines combined with elements from Hindu occultism and Gnosis.⁴ These Sabians must not be confused with the Sabaeans or Mandaeans from southern of Iraq and Persia.⁵

One of the common mistakes made in relation to Shi'ah Islam is the attempt to compare it with the various schisms found in Christianity. Shi'ism is often portrayed as a schismatic coextension of dissident groups organized in small cells or brotherhoods driven by an uncompromising parochial spirit. **The concept of *inshih'ib* [division] in the Islamic religion must not be confused with that of *fitnah*, definitive division and irreparable rupture.** In fact, Shi'ism suffered no "division" [*inshih'ib*] or rupture [*fitnah*] during the Imamate of the first three Imams: 'Ali, Hasan, and Husayn.

After the death of Husayn, however, the majority of Shi'ites placed their trust in 'Ali ibn al-Husayn Zayn al-'Abidin,⁶ while a minority, known as al-Kaysaniyah, believed that the right to succession belonged to Muhammad ibn al-Banafiyyah. He was the third son of 'Ali, but not through Fatimah. As a result, he cannot be considered a descendant of the Prophet.⁷ Despite this fact, Muhammad ibn Banafiyyah was proclaimed by his partisans as the Fourth Imam and the promised Mahd. During the time he sought refuge in the mountains of Rawah, which form a cordillera in Madinah, Mukhtar al-Thaqafi served as his "representative."⁸ It was believed that Muhammad ibn Banafiyyah would come down one day and appear as the rightly-guided and long-awaited Messiah.

In accordance with Shi'ite thought, the Mahd is a man motivated by God who is also a military chief and a warrior. Even if the followers of Mukhtar al-Thaqafi gave an extremist character to the eschatological idea of the Hidden Imam, the Islamic figure of the Messiah as restorer of revealed religion is not an invention of Mukhtar or a Christian influence. **The Mahd is a spiritual synthesis of all revealed forms and not a mere uniform syncretism. It is a concept that is expressed in all its**

dimensions and depth in many *aspects* of the Prophet as well as many traditions of the Imams.⁹

In synthesis, we can say that after the death of Imam Zayn al-ʿAbidin, the majority of Shʿites accepted Muhammad al-Baqir as the Fifth Imam, despite the fact that a minority followed his brother Zayd al-Shahid, who were known from that moment on as Zaydis.¹⁰ Imam Muhammad al-Baqir was succeeded by his son Jaʿfar al-Sadiq the Sixth Imam and, after his death, his son Musa al-Kadhim was recognized as the Seventh Imam. Nevertheless, an opposition group insisted that the successor of the Sixth Imam was his elder son Ismaʿil who had died when his father was still alive.¹¹ This group split from the Shʿite majority and became known as the Ismaʿilis. Others, instead, preferred ʿAbdullah al-Aftah and some even chose Muhammad, both sons of the Sixth Imam. Still, there were even those who considered Jaʿfar al-Sadiq as the Last Imam and were convinced that none would succeed him. Likewise, after the martyrdom of Imam Musa al-Kadhim, the majority followed his son ʿAli al-Riʿazi as the Eighth Imam. But there were those who refused to recognize any Imam after al-Kadhim and came to constitute the brotherhood of the Waqifiyyah.¹² From the Eighth to the Twelfth Imam, considered by the Shʿite majority as the Awaited Mahdi, no important division [*inshib*] took place within Shʿism.

However it occurred, what is important to retain here is that, since its origins, Shʿite Islam represents, more than a spiritual and political rebellion against illegitimate authority, a movement of “awakening,” like that of *renaissance* in the Sunni world. It was not a reformist movement in the Christian sense, like the one that took place in Europe during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Shʿite Islam represents an integral restoration of Muhammadan theosophy and metaphysics through the application and practice of all the teachings of the Holy Imams, who linked the outer meanings of the text to the inner meanings of the divine word.

The root cause for the development of Shʿism is utterly alien from worldly affairs. The source of Shʿism is not a simple heresy or a political disagreement. **Shʿite Islam springs from a metaphysical reality, a process of epiphany which establishes a new logophonic manifestation of Prophethood. Shʿism, as the Islam of ʿAli and the *ahl al-bayt*, is the temporal and earthly pillar of the eternal and celestial reality of the *wilayah*. The *wilayah*, the spiritual guidance of the Imams, is a manifestation of Prophethood.** The *wilayah* is an inner or occult reality which is found in potential and action within the same Prophethood. The *wilayah* is a manifestation of Prophethood that is revealed in a new way. The *wilayah* is not the renovation of the anterior Qurʿanic revelation but its closure. The *wilayah* is an unveiling of the esoteric and metaphysical truths found in the Qurʿan. **While the Prophet sealed the age of formal revelation, by means of the divine concession of the *wilayah* and the Imamate to his descendants, a new age of profound “revelations” was opened.¹³ Just as the pleroma of the Twelve Imams represents the fullness of the Muhammadan Reality, their teachings and doctrines are flashes from the sole Muhammadan Light, the logophonic effusions and manifestations of the Qurʿanic revelation: its perfect synthesis and exact formulation.**

Finally, in order for there to be a living branch from the Islamic trunk, a favorable doctrinal terrain was

required, a spiritual identity with its own characteristics which were qualitatively different from the other ideological options of its age. With such an understanding, the historical appearance of Shī‘ism seems to be completely inevitable. Without its presence, of course, the history of Islām and the world would have totally changed. In our judgement, any attempt to reduce the historical development of Shī‘ism to a mere political problem related to the succession or to some insurgent elements is misguided at best. This applies to figures as fictitious as ‘Abd Allāh ibn Saba’, the Yemenite of Jewish extraction, and as real and historical as Mukhtār al-Thaqafī.

‘Abd Allāh ibn Saba’ and Mukhtār al-Thaqafī are presented by Alessandro Bausani as “extremists” [ghulāt] [14](#) and precursors of a political Shī‘ism. Muslim and non-Muslim specialists have long disputed which one deserves the inappropriate title of “founder of Shī‘ite Islām.” The Italian Orientalist briefly refers to ‘Abd Allāh ibn Saba’ as an exalted personality, an ex-Jewish Yemenite who deified ‘Alī during his lifetime. The feeble historical foundation surrounding someone considered to be no less than the “founder of Shī‘ite Islām” should have led Bausani and other contemporary Orientalists to infer that they were dealing with a fictitious character or an insignificant individual whose existence had not even been faithfully documented by the annals of time.

It is shocking to learn, nonetheless, that the refusal to recognize Shī‘ism as a historical and meta-historical reality profoundly rooted since the dawn of Islām has led certain Orientalists to discard the strongest evidence in favor of the weakest. In reality, **‘Abd Allāh ibn Saba’ is a literary character, a fabrication of Sayf ibn ‘Umar al-Zindīq [the Atheist or Dualist], a famous falsifier of aḥādīth or prophetic traditions.** [15](#) The absence of any convincing evidence to support the existence of ‘Abd Allāh ibn Saba’, partnered with the constantly contradictory and nebulous character of his life, convinced some Shī‘ite scholars long ago that they were facing the figure of an imposter. Despite this body of bona fide doubts, it took longer than expected for this fact to be confirmed. In fact, it took no less than one thousand years before a perspicacious research scholar, the erudite Shī‘ite ‘Allamah Sayyid Murtaḥā al-‘Askarī, shed light on this somber subject. For many centuries, the detractors of Shī‘ism used the tale of ‘Abd Allāh ibn Saba’ as a pretext to deny its purely Islamic origin and to corrupt its genuine Muḥammadan connection. They have stubbornly presented Shī‘ism as the creation of an ex-Jew, thence as the political scheme of an upstart Muslim convert. As a result, the figure of the “convert” in the Muslim world continues to be the center around which all suspicions converge, whether reasonable or groundless. [16](#)

Along with ‘Abd Allāh ibn Saba’, Mukhtār al-Thaqafī is often cited as one of the persons directly responsible for the creation of Shī‘ism. He appeared as the inspiration for an armed resistance that took place in the year 40 of the ḥijrah, during the regime of Mu‘āwiyah. The revolutionary movement was directed against the Caliph and the powerful governors of the Umayyad clan who were all considered, without exception, as preachers of moral perdition and religious innovation. During the period of the first three *khulafā’ al-rāshidīn* [rightly-guided Caliphs]—Abū Bakr, ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb and ‘Uthmān—between the years 632 and 656, ‘Alī ibn Abī Ḥālib and his followers were subjected to a considerable

degree of political coercion which relaxed temporarily when 'Alī acceded to the Caliphate. After the death of 'Alī, however, the persecution of the Shī'ites became increasingly intense and intolerable under the Umayyad regime. [17](#)

With the proclamation of Mu'awiyah as the Caliph in Jerusalem in the year 660, the Caliphate was moved to Damascus and acquired an entirely different character than the one it possessed during the rule of the four rightly-guided Caliphs. [18](#) The defining characteristics of Mu'awiyah's rule were nepotism and tyranny. The Caliph turned into a "king" [melik] who governed as an absolute sovereign in the manner of the Persian and Byzantine emperors. [19](#) With the death of Mu'awiyah, he was succeeded by his son Yazīd [680–683], described by historians as a degenerate drunkard. [20](#) Successive uprisings against him broke out through all of Arabia, inspired and encouraged by the Shī'ites who despised the moral and spiritual decadence of the Umayyads. The Shī'ite revolts multiplied throughout the Umayyad Caliphate. The political reaction and righteous revenge for the death of Husayn, the youngest son of 'Alī and Fātimah, occurred in Karbala during the reign of Yazīd. The revolution was led on behalf of Mu'ammad ibn al-Manafiyyah, whom we have already mentioned, and its goal was accomplished by Mukhtār al-Thaqafī of Kāfah in the year 685. It was in Kāfah, one of the holiest cities in Islām, that the various esoteric and political branches of Shī'ism appeared. Fond of the old Christianizing formula of the Orientalists, Hitti affirms that "the blood of Husayn, and the blood of his father, was the seed of the Shī'ite Church." [21](#)

The unequal efforts of the distinct Shī'ite groups against the Umayyad regime, each distinct in nature, meaning, purpose and reach, definitively did nothing but lead the insurgents to disaster, to merciless, heartless, and relentless repression and to brutal martyrdom. But, despite these vagaries, they are not movements undeserving of attention. They have their place, which is not at all negligible, in the course of the historical evolution of the Shī'ism we attempt to trace. In short, Mukhtār al-Thaqafī lived in a period of difficult transition in the history of Shī'ism. As we have mentioned, it was, to a great extent, a time of violent dissent and disputes. Bribery and political crimes were routinely used by the Umayyad regime to suppress its opponents. As a result, the division of Shī'ite Islām into distinct parties or factions, each one following 'Alī and some of his descendants, became an instrument of political struggle and the sole means of liberation and hope for the oppressed.

It was then, during those dark days of despotism, that Mukhtār al-Thaqafī appeared on the scene, transforming himself into one of the most active combatants and one of the most outstanding and ingenious revolutionaries of his time. It goes without saying that Mukhtār al-Thaqafī was Shī'ite, and probably forcibly so. In the religious and social framework of his time, he was also a messianic revolutionary, illuminated by Gnostic ideas. In line with the goals and aspirations of his political program, he accomplished his mission to kill 'Ubayd Allāh ibn Ziyād and, in so doing, he avenged the death of the Third Imām, Husayn al-Sibī al-Aghar, the youngest grandson of the Prophet. The personality and character of Mukhtār al-Thaqafī aroused a great deal of controversy in the early history of Shī'ite Islām. Some sources present him as an ambitious adventurer and a faithful follower of the political

authority of *ahl al-bayt*. For others, he was an enlightened being who was almost raised to the rank of a prophet by his contemporaries. Although he never made such a claim himself, he did indicate directly and indirectly, as we will see shortly, that his actions were inspired by the angel of revelation. After overcoming some initial hurdles, Mukhtar's personal success was great and long-lasting. He finished his days with praise and acclaim, recognized as one of the bravest heroes and one of the most efficient military leaders of Shi'ism. He was the implacable avenger of Husayn, the standard of the *tawwabun* [penitents] who consolidated the aspirations of this revolutionary Shi'ite movement whose appearance was motivated by the tragedy of Karbala.²² The *tawwabun* or penitents constituted the first avenging movement of Karbala. However, as soon as Mukhtar al-Thaqafi appeared on the scene, the *tawwabun* were assimilated, and perhaps rightfully so, into his brand of revolutionary Messianism.

Regardless of the reason behind Mukhtar's popularity, the question of his religious commitment coincides with the establishment of an initiatory hierarchy which is distinct from the Shi'ite structure. Since Shi'ite thought was already sufficiently delineated, we must say without hesitation that his divergent approach did not arouse much sympathy among the Shi'ites. The cause for such aversion is to be found in an accidental slip related to Imam Hasan. During his conflict with Mu'awiyah, the Imam sought asylum in Madinah, in the house of the governor Sa'd ibn Mas'ud who was Mukhtar's uncle. Unexpectedly and inexplicably, Mukhtar suggested to his uncle that he should turn in Imam Hasan to the Umayyad Caliph, who was searching for him. He told his uncle that he could subjugate the deposed Caliph and declare that "The treaty made with Hasan is null and void. It is under my feet." Obviously, the governor emphatically rejected the treacherous suggestion made by his nephew. From this incident, we can only lament Mukhtar's political blunder which did not go unnoticed by the Shi'ites. They unanimously and severely reproached him for being so inconsiderate and disloyal towards the first son of 'Ali and the oldest grandson of the Prophet.²³ Further on, in an isolated and equally accidental incident, he regained the confidence and the appreciation of the Shi'ites. This occurred when he refused to appear before Ziyad ibn Abih, the Governor of Kufah, to testify against Ujair ibn 'Adi, the leader of the one of the Shi'ite rebellions to overthrow the tyrant. It seems that, from that moment onwards, Mukhtar adopted a position that was increasingly favorable towards the Shi'ite cause. At the same time, his revolutionary rhetoric acquired an undeniable messianic character which occasionally resembled revelation. Mukhtar was a man who possessed psychological qualities in line with his strong and unusually esoteric religious mentality. He quickly converted himself into a spontaneous orator. His rhetoric was smooth and eloquent. It overflowed with obscure reflections and periphrastic expressions, which gave it a poetic flow which superficially resembled the revealed word. His speeches gave the impression that they came from an inspired source. It was for this reason that Mukhtar often alleged that his spirit was illuminated by Gabriel, the Angel of Revelation, who, in an ineffable and mysterious way, warned him of the unexpected.

Mukhtar's ingenious rhetorical slips had a tremendous influence on his followers and convinced them of the appearance of the Awaited Mahdi, identified with Muhammad ibn Hanafiyyah, who was coming to restore order and justice. Due to this deep-rooted Shi'ite conviction, he was considered by his followers

as the “Representative of the Mahdī,” namely, a delegate of the third son of Imām ‘Alī. This is the manner in which he was recognized and allowed himself to be addressed. In the years 685 and 686, he established a Shī‘ite-oriented government in Kūfah.²⁴ This was the first time this was done since the time of Imām ‘Alī when he finally received his much delayed turn to occupy the Caliphate and to fully assume the supreme role he had inherited from the Prophet.

It must be remembered, however, that similar excesses on the part of Mukhtār caused, if not serious religious worries, at least considerable annoyance to the ruling religious authorities. His influence was great in the genesis of one sect, the Mukhtāriyyah, but did not shake the foundation of Imāmī Gnosis. Although Mukhtār’s ideas were not free from doctrinal errors, they did not radically alter the esoteric concept of the Hidden Imām which is the real touchstone of all Shī‘ite thought: past, present, and future.²⁵ The repercussion of his ideas was sufficient to inspire the partial development of an erroneous path which, in its true sense, was nothing more than a stubbornness to maintain ideas which were contrary to those espoused by the majority of Shī‘ites.

In fairness, the interesting and eventful life of this unique man brought him the opportunity to regain the sympathy of the Shī‘ites. As we have said, avenging the death of ‘Uṣayn, the martyr of Karbala, was the mission that was thrust upon Mukhtār al-Thaqafī, as well as Sulaymān ibn ‘Urad, leader of the *tawwābīn*. The target of this vengeance was ‘Ubayd Allāh ibn Ziyād, considered unanimously among Shī‘ites to be the direct instigator and the main executor in the death of Imām ‘Uṣayn and his family. And here is one of those interesting facts that mark the lives of the chosen ones; the martyr Maytham al-Tammār, one of the closest companions of Imām ‘Alī and one of the saints of Islām who is highly venerated by Shī‘īs, was imprisoned as a political prisoner by ‘Ubayd Allāh ibn Ziyād on charges of conspiring against the Umayyad regime. Destiny would have it that Mukhtār was also in the same prison. It is there that Maytham predicted that, once he was released, he would fulfill his mission of avenging ‘Uṣayn which is, after all, exactly what happened.²⁶

We have focused our attention on Mukhtār for the purpose of clearing up some common confusion related to the creation of the Party of ‘Alī. We wish to take advantage of this opportunity to clarify another error. Bausani says that Mukhtār took over Kūfah and preached messianic doctrines and starting very interesting customs like the cult of the vacant throne. While this is true, it is not the complete truth. As “interesting” as this custom may be to Bausani—perhaps due to its symbolism—we must point out that Mukhtār never introduced “a cult of the vacant throne.” As Dozy explains, the idea of the throne was simply an ingenious ruse that this clever and brilliant strategist contrived to incite his army to battle. He had the idea of purchasing an old armchair that he had re-upholstered with a fine and expensive silk, converting it into the famous “vacant throne” of ‘Alī. This unusual inducement brought forth its desired fruit. Ibrāhīm, the commander of Mukhtār’s troops, fought in an unusually brave and heroic fashion and killed ‘Ubayd Allāh ibn Ziyād with his own sword. In the minds of the Shī‘ite soldiers the supposed throne of ‘Alī truly acquired a highly symbolic value. Mukhtār had told them at the beginning of the battle that the throne would represent for them what the Ark of the Covenant

represented to the Children of Israel.

As serious as the political events that coincide with the start of Shī‘ism were, they cannot be considered a sufficient reason for its historical appearance. It is certain that Abū Bakr’s assumption of the Caliphate of the Islamic Community instead of ‘Alī, the coerced resignation of ‘Uṣayn and the martyrdom of ‘Uṣayn, the division of the Islamic world into various groups as a result of the bloody raids and forays of Mu‘awiyah and Yazīd—the founders of the Umayyad dynasty—forced Muslims, Gnostics included, to take sides. However, the reason for which they were fighting goes well beyond what today is qualified as “political.”

Not all of the political insurrections which took place in the name of Shī‘ism reflected the complex reality of the Imāmate and what it represents metaphysically. Likewise, the development of the esoteric doctrine and thought of Shī‘ism in Islām should not be linked to the appearance of the word “Shī‘ite” or “Shī‘ism.” These terms simply designate a particular “party” or a “group” of Muslims.²⁷ As Muḥammad B. ‘Uqayr al-‘Uṣayrī observes, one thing is the meaning of the term, and the other is the distinct doctrine it designates. To say that the Shī‘ites are a “party” of legitimistic minority Muslims merely expresses one aspect of the term.

In the time of the Prophet, as can be seen in many *ahādīth*, there are references to the “Shī‘ah of ‘Alī” and the “Shī‘ah of *ahl al-bayt*”²⁸ In Arabic, shī‘ah means “partisans,” “adepts,” or “followers” of someone.²⁹ As a result, it is said that Shī‘ites are those who are partisans of Imām ‘Alī and his descendants. They are those who consider that the fulfillment of the sunnah of the Prophet demands the complete and obligatory observance of all of its dispositions and rulings. This evidently, and most importantly, includes the designation [*naḥw*] made by the Prophet of Imām ‘Alī as his successor [*khalīfah*].

¹. Editor’s Note: This current which seeks to split Shī‘ism into factions has even spread among Muslim scholars. Sachedina holds that Shī‘ism was a political movement which acquired religious undertones (Islamic Messianism 5). Jafrī recognizes the division between political Shī‘ism and religious Shī‘ism (97) as does Rasūlī Ja‘fariyan who speaks of three forms of Shī‘ism: political, creedal and Iraqī. The truth of the matter, however, is that “Shī‘ism was a religious movement that also encompassed social and political aspects of society” (Rizvī Chapter 1).

². Editor’s Note: The author’s attitude is all-encompassing, eager to embrace, and stresses the common ground of *tawḥīd* on which all Muslims stand. This can be contrasted with Tājīnī’s attitude which seeks more to splinter than to soothe, even rejecting the close legal, theological, philosophical and political ties which bind Twelvers, Seveners and Zaydis: “Our discussion does not invoke the other sects as Ismā‘īliyyah and Zaydiyyah, as we believe in their being like other sects in not adhering to *‘adāth al-thaqalayn*, and their belief in ‘Alī’s imāmah after the Messenger of Allāh is of no use” (The Shī‘ah 331 Note 1). This attitude also ignores the similarities between Sunnism, ḥanafism, and Shī‘ism.

As M.G.S. Hodgson explains, “in its whole piety Sunnī Islām can be called half-Shī‘ite” (4). Similarly, Naḥrī observes that “In certain areas of the Islamic world...one meets among ḥanafis certain groups as devoted to the Shī‘ite Imāms, especially ‘Alī and ‘Uṣayn, as any Shī‘ite could be, yet completely Sunnī in their practice of the law [*madhhab*]” (ḥanafī Essays 107). In reality, these so-called “half-Shī‘ites” are neither one thing nor the other, but rather “seekers of the straight path.”

³. Editor’s Note: The Ismā‘īliyyah are known as Seveners as they follow Seven Imāms, the first six Shī‘ite Imāms and Ismā‘īl as the seventh.

⁴. Editor’s Note: Some Ismā‘īliyyah adapted the Qarmathian syncretistic catechism to other forms of monotheism, to

Ḥarrānīan paganism, and even to Mazdeism (Massignon 60). As ‘Allāmah Ḥabībullah notes, “The Ismā‘īlis have a philosophy in many ways similar to that of the Sabaeans [star worshippers] combined with elements of Hindu gnosis” (Shī‘ite Islām 78).

5. Editor’s Note: As Netton explains, “The Sabians were a pagan sect who, according to some, had cleverly identified themselves with the ḥabībīn of the Qur’ān to avoid persecution” (15). Ḥarrān, in what is now southeastern Turkey, was the home of the star worshipping Sabians with their transcendent philosophy. The Sabians of Ḥarrān must not be confused with the Sabaeans who lived in what is today Yemen and who founded colonies in Ethiopia and Eritrea. As for the Mandaeans, they are members of an ancient Gnostic sect surviving in southern Iraq and which used the Aramaic language in their writings.

6. Editor’s Note: Zayn al-‘abīdīn is responsible for one of the great masterpieces of Shī‘ite supplications, al-ḥaḥḥāh al-ḥajādiyyah, rendered beautifully into English by William Chittick as The Psalms of Islām.

7. Author’s Note: He was the fruit of the marriage between the Imām and a woman from the Ḥanafī tribe, rather than from the Prophet’s daughter.

8. Editor’s Note: We must remember that, despite his accomplishments, Mukhtār al-Thaqafī did not recognize the Imām of his Age. If prophets and Imāms are infallible, ordinary human beings like Mukhtār are far from perfect. Although Mukhtār did a great deal of good and will always be remembered for avenging the death of al-Ḥusayn he was misguided in many matters, including following Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥanafiyyah as the Mahdī. As as followers of the Twelve Imāms, Shī‘ite Muslims have always opposed and denounced all fabricators of false traditions, even when those traditions are favorable to their cause. Shī‘ite muḥadithīn reject Mukhtār as an authority on the basis that he became an extremist. For the sake of historical accuracy, it is important to show human beings with their vices and virtues. The author does not present a romantic, idealized version of Mukhtār: he shows him warts and all.

9. Editor’s Note: For more English-language books on the Mahdī, consult Shaykh al-Mufīd’s Kitāb al-irshād, Saḥedīnā’s Islāmīc Messianism; An Inquiry Concerning al-Mahdī by Ayḥullāh Muḥammad Baqir al-Ḥadr and Discussions Concerning al-Mahdī by Ayḥullāh Luḥullāh Ḥafīz al-Gulpaygīn.

10. Editor’s Note: The Zaydis are followers of Zayd ibn ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn, the son of the Fourth Imām, who led a revolt against the Umayyads and was killed in 738. Initially, the Zaydis held that the true Imām was the Ḥusaynid Imām who rose up in revolt. Many of the Zaydis accepted the Caliphate of Abū Bakr and ‘Umar, and some even accepted the early part of ‘Uthmān’s. This attitude forms part of the theological doctrine of the Imāmate of the maḥḥūl [the less excellent]. It was agreed that ‘Alī was al-afḥal [the most excellent] but conceded that the Imāmate of the less excellent could occur when the most excellent did not publicly assert his right to the Imāmate by armed revolt. For more on the beliefs of the Zaydis, see Howard’s “Introduction” to Shaykh al-Mufīd Kitāb al-irshād (xxiii-xxv) and ‘Allāmah Ḥabībullah’s Shī‘ite Islām (76-77).

11. Editor’s Note: Although the sources differ on the subject, Ismā‘īlī may not have been qualified for the Imāmate for several reasons: firstly, because his father Imām al-Ḥadiq had appointed Mūsā as his successor, and secondly, because Ismā‘īlī passed away before his father. The Imāmate is not a system of royalty or inheritance. It is a matter of divine pre-ordination, a covenant from Allāh. In any event, the Sixth Imām did not designate his eldest son to be his successor, nor did it cause a great doctrinal or theological problem among the Shī‘ah.

12. Editor’s Note: The Waḥqīfites were those who held that Mūsā was the Imām who would return as the Madhī.

13. Editor’s Note: The belief in post-prophetic guidance is not exclusively Shī‘ite. It is related in Sunnī traditions that the Messenger of Allāh said, “Surely Messengership and Prophethood are terminated, so there will be no messenger or prophet after me except mubashshirīn” (Tirmidhī). He also stated that: “There is nothing to come of Prophethood except mubashshirīn.” People asked, “What are they?” The Holy Prophet replied, “True visions” and these were declared by the Holy Prophet to be one forty-sixth of Prophethood (Bukhārī).

14. Editor’s Note: Ghulūḥ, plural of ghulūḥ, is an Arabic term deriving from the verb ghulūḥ which means “to exaggerate or exceed the proper bounds.” The verbal noun is ghuluw and means “exaggeration.” The ghulūḥ or extremists are sects which deify ‘Alī. In Iran, they are known as the Ahl al-ḥaq [people of the truth], ‘Alī llāhīs [‘Alī worshippers]: in Iraq they are called Shabak, Bajwan, Sarliyya, Kkaiyya, and Ibrāhīmīyyah. In Syria, they are known as Nuḥayris or ‘Alawīs. In Turkey, they are called Bektashīs, Kizilbash (Alevis), Takhtajīs and Çepnis. The Shaykhīs are also a modern ghulūḥ group.

They are followers of Shaykh Ahmad al-Aḥsāʿī (d. 1830) who taught that the infallible fourteen are the cause of the universe, in whose hands are the life and death and the livelihood of humanity. According to Moosa, al-Aḥsāʿī seems to justify this belief by explaining that God is too transcendent to operate the universe by Himself and therefore deputized the infallible fourteen to operate the universe on his behalf (109). If this is correct, the Shaykhs resemble the mufawwiḥah [the delegators]. As Fyzze explains,

The mufawwiḥah are those who believe that God created the Prophet and ‘Alī and then ceased to function. Thereafter, it was these two who arranged everything in the world. They create and sustain and destroy; Allāh has nothing to do with these things. (141).

When examining the Shaykhs, it is important to differentiate between the Bahāʾī-controlled group from the original teachings of Shaykh Ahmad al-Aḥsāʿī. As far as Shiʿism is concerned, there is no doubt that the Imāms are the Lords of Existence. What happens with Ahmad al-Aḥsāʿī is that he developed entirely esoteric doctrines and many have understood him literally without understanding that the ideas he was expressing were metaphysical rather than philosophical or theological.

For Gnostics, the role of the Imāms is viewed cosmically. There is no doubt that the Bābīs and Bahāʾīs have misinterpreted this role in an extreme fashion, the first in an esoteric way, and the latter in a literal way, distorting the doctrines of Shaykh Ahmad al-Aḥsāʿī. The Universal Legislator is the one who initiates a cycle and brings it to its end. He does not destroy the world in a physical sense but in a historical one. He closes one cycle and commences a second. The Imāms closed the cycle of prophecy only to initiate the cycle of the wilāyah. Imām Mahdī will come to close the cycle of wilāyah of the Prophet Muḥammad.

If Shaykh Ahmad al-Aḥsāʿī said that the Imāms controlled the universe, he said so in the sense of prophetic ḥadīth which states that without an Imām, the world would be destroyed and would not last a single second. There are also other Sunnī and Shiʿite traditions regarding Imām ‘Alī making it clear that the Imām is center or heart of the world without whom the world would stop to exist. There is also the ḥadīth which states that when Imām Mahdī returns, reason would leave the world and humanity would degenerate into destruction. The work of Shaykh Ahmad al-Aḥsāʿī need to be re-examined from a Twelver Shiʿite perspective. This is the only way his scholarship can be saved from Bābī-Bahāʾī interpretations which have distorted his original doctrines.

As for the ghulāt, they are of different ethnic origins, speak different languages and are divided into different denominations. They share the common belief in the apotheosis of ‘Alī and in a trinity of God, Muḥammad and ‘Alī or, as among the Nuḥayris, of ‘Alī, Muḥammad and Salmān al-Fārisī. They practice holy communion and public or private confession. According to Moosa Matti, “their religion is a syncretism of extreme Shiʿite, pagan, and Christian beliefs, and they fall outside the pale of orthodox Islām” (418). In fact, “some of the beliefs of the ghulāt have a greater affinity with ancient astral cults and Christianity than with Islām” (ix).

The Prophet Muḥammad prophesied their appearance when he told ‘Alī: “In one respect, you are like Jesus. The Jews went so far in hating him that they turned hostile towards him and calumniated his mother and the Christians loved him too much that they elevated him to an undeserved status.” On another occasion, he told him that “I fear some sects of my community will say of you what the Christians said of Jesus” (Nuṣṣaybī 1: 112–13) and “‘Alī, if it was not for the fact that I am concerned that some factions will say of you what the Christians say of Jesus, son of Mary, I would say of you today words such as (after them) you would never pass a gathering of men without them taking the soil from your feet” (Mufīd 79).

Imām ‘Alī warned against the extremists, saying that “Two groups will fall into perdition: The extremist who adore me unduly; and the enemies whose animosity leads them to calumniate me.” The naḥqābīs are those who hate ‘Alī bitterly; the ghulāt are those who literally adore him. The Imāms who followed ‘Alī condemned the extremists in the harshest terms (Rayshani).

Despite its deficiencies, Matti’s Extremist Shiʿites is one of the only scholarly books on extremist Shiʿites available in English. Regrettably, the author makes some ludicrous claims; namely, 1) asserting that when the muezzins in Iran call the people to prayer they cry out ‘Allāhu Akbar! Allāhu Akbar! Khomeini is Rahbar, Khomeini is Rahbar’ (Allāh is Most Great; Allāh is Most Great! Khomeini is the religious guide) thus placing Khomeini before the testimony of faith that ‘There is no god but Allāh and Muḥammad is the Messenger of Allāh’ (99); 2) claiming that the Shiʿites of Iran believe that ‘Alī is close

to being a God (xxiii); 3) asserting that Sunnism represents Islamic orthodoxy (421); 4) and, finally, 5) categorizing the ghulāt as heterodox as opposed to heretical (418). It should also be noted that the term ghulāt has different connotations depending on who uses it. In Sunni sources, even moderate figures are seen as ghulāt.

[15.](#) Editor's Note: As Naḥrī explains, "The zanḍiqah [sing. zindīq] are identified specifically in Islamic history with Manichaeans, but the word is also used more generally ... to mean unbeliever and heretic" (A Shi'ite Anthology 65, note 125). Saif ibn 'Umar al-Tamīmī is categorically discredited by 'Allamah Murtaḥā'ī 'Askarī in his 'Abdullah ibn Saba' and Other Myths, 3rd. ed. trans. M.J. Muqaddas, Tehran: Islamic Thought Foundation, 1995. Sukaynah bint 'Ubayn, who died shortly after the tragedy of Karbala, was also transformed into a literary character by story-tellers and is now exploited by feminist writers like Farīmah Mernessī (192-94).

[16.](#) Editor's Note: Héctor Abad Dharr Manzollillo's article "Los 'convertos' en países con minorías musulmanas" ["Muslim 'Converts' in Countries where Muslims are a Minority"] addresses this issue with eloquence.

[17.](#) Editor's Note: As Jafrī explains, "Mu'awiyah seems to have been trying to destroy, at the slightest pretext, those of 'Alī's followers who could not be bought or intimidated into submission" (167). In short, the history of Shi'ism is written with the blood of martyrs.

[18.](#) Editor's Note: Rather than 'Umar, the "abomination of desolation" (Daniel 9:27; Matthew, 24: 15; Mark 13: 14) might more appropriately refer to Mu'awiyah's coronation as Caliph.

[19.](#) Editor's Note: At the beginning of the reign of 'Uthmān when the Umayyads occupied prominent positions, Abū Sufyān said, "O Children of Umayyah! Now that this kingdom has come to you, play with it as the children play with a ball, and pass it from one to another in your clan. We are not sure whether there is a paradise or hell, but this kingdom is a reality." (al-Istī'āb by Ibn 'Abd al-Barr 4: 1679) In Sharh ibn Abī 'Adād, the last sentence is quoted as follows: "By him in whose name Abū Sufyān swears, there is neither punishment nor reckoning, neither Garden nor Fire, neither Resurrection nor Day of Judgment" (9: 53) Then Abū Sufyān went to 'Ud and kicked at the grave of 'Amzah [the uncle of the Prophet who was martyred in the Battle of 'Ud in fighting against Abū Sufyān] and said, "O Abū Ya'lī! See that the kingdom which you fought against has finally come back to us." (Sharḥ ibn Abī 'Adād, 16: 136).

When Mu'awiyah took over the Caliphate, he said, "I did not fight you to pray, fast, and pay charity, but rather to be your leader and control you" (Tadhkirat al-khawāṣṣ, Sibḥ Ibn al-Jawzī al-ḥanafī, 191-194; Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, in his Saḥāḥ; Abū Nu'aym; al-Suddī and al-Sha'bī). There are numerous instances where Mu'awiyah is recorded as saying, in reference to himself, "I am the first king in Islam" (Jafrī 154). When Yazīd became Caliph, he said, "Hashimite played with the throne, but no revelation was revealed, nor was there a true message" (History of al-ḥabar, Arabic, 13: 2174; Tadhkirat al-khawāṣṣ; Sibḥ Ibn al-Jawzī al-ḥanafī 261). The Caliph Manḥūr defiantly declared: "Only I am the authority of God upon His earth" (Jafrī 280; ḥabar, Tārīkh III 426). The Turkish Sultāns described themselves as the "Shadows of God on Earth."

[20.](#) Editor's Note: Yazīd, son of Mu'awiyah, son of Abū Sufyān ruled from 60 A.H. to 64 A.H. His army sacked Madīnah in 63 A.H., killing 17,000 Muslims, and leaving 1,000 Muslim women pregnant as the result of rape. Thereafter, his army marched on Makkah, destroying one of the walls of the Holy Ka'bah and setting it on fire (Dūr al-Tawḥīd 139). He enacted the wholesale massacre of the Prophet's Family at Karbala in which 'Ubayn, the second son of 'Alī and Farīmah, was martyred along with his faithful band of 72 followers. Only 'Alī, the son of 'Ubayn, was providentially spared, due to illness.

[21.](#) Editor's Note: See P. K. Hitti, History of the Arabs from the Earliest Times to the Present 10th ed. (London 1970): 191.

[22.](#) Editor's Note: The very name, "the Place of Suffering" or "Land of Anguish," is indicative of the tragedy that befell there.

[23.](#) Editor's Note: For a more complete understanding of the circumstances that led Imām ḥasan to make a treaty with Mu'awiyah, see 'Abbās Aḥmad al-Bostānī's Pour une lecture correcte de l'imam al-ḥasan et de son traité de réconciliation avec Mu'awīyah. For an overview of the quietist as opposed to activist approach to politics in Shi'ite Islam, see my "Strategic Compromise in Islam."

[24.](#) Editor's Note: It is important to remember that Imām Zayn al-'Abidīn did not respond positively to the call of Mukhtār al-Thaqafī to rise up against the Umayyads. The Imām was fully aware that opposition forces could not succeed in tearing down Umayyad rule and deemed that any participation in such activities would lead to the extermination of the real bearers of the divine message on earth: he himself and the ahl al-bayt. As a result, the Imām distanced himself from any and all movements which might draw the attention of the authorities. For more on the subject, see: Imām Zayn al-'Abidīn. Qum:

al-Balagh Foundation, 1994: 49–50. Surprisingly, another book by al-Balagh claims that the Imām supported the revolutionaries. While he did sympathize with the resistance and pray for Allāh’s mercy on Mukhtār, this should not be interpreted as support. The book also claims that the Imām’s supplications “are a clear expression of his political and ideological opposition to the rulers of the time.” See: Ahlul Bayt: Their Status, Manner and Course. Qum: al-Balagh Foundation, 1992: 148. This view, which is an echo of Padwick’s comments on the ḡahḡfat al-khḡmisa, give a false impression of the work. As Chittick clarifies: “Though the Imām makes a number of allusions to the injustice suffered by his family and the fact that their rightful heritage has been usurped, no one can call this a major theme of the ḡahḡfah” (xx).

25. Editor’s Note: The belief in the Invisible Imām is at the heart of Shī‘ite Islām.

26. While in prison, Maytham told Mukhtār: “You will escape and you will rebel to avenge the blood of ‘Usayn, peace be upon him. Then you will kill this man who is going to kill us” (Mufīd).

27. Editor’s Note: The term ahl al-sunnah wa al-jama‘ah appeared for the first time during the time of Mu‘ḡwiyah. During the rule of ‘Alī, the Islamic Empire was divided into two parts: the part controlled by Imām ‘Alī, and the part controlled by Mu‘ḡwiyah. After the martyrdom of Imām ‘Alī, Mu‘ḡwiyah assumed control over the entire community. That year was proclaimed “the year of the jama‘ah” or “the year of the majority of the community.” The term ahl al-sunnah wa al-jama‘ah appears in its complete form during the peace treaty between Mu‘ḡwiyah and Imām ‘Asan ibn ‘Alī. The term was chosen to differentiate the followers of Mu‘ḡwiyah, the ahl al-sunnah, from the followers of the Prophet’s family, the ahl al-bayt. The term sunnḡ is an abbreviated form of ahl al-sunnah wa al-jama‘ah. The early Muslims were also known as Shī‘ites (followers): the shī‘ah of ‘Alī, the shī‘ah of Mu‘ḡwiyah, and so forth. See Ja‘fariyan’s “Shī‘ism and its Types during the Early Centuries.”

28. Editor’s Note: The Messenger of Allāh said, “Glad tidings O ‘Alī! Verily you and your companions and your Shī‘ah will be in Paradise” (Sunnḡ References: Faḡḡil al-ḡaḡbah, by Aḡmad ibn ‘anbal, v. 2, 655; ḡilyatul awliyyḡ, by Abḡ Nu‘aym, v. 4, 329; Tḡrḡkh, by al-Khaḡḡb al-Baghdḡdḡ, v. 12, 289; al-Awsaḡ, by al-ḡabarḡḡ; Majma‘ al-zawḡid, by al-Haythamḡ, v. 10, 21–22; al-Darqutnḡ, who said, “This tradition has been transmitted via numerous authorities;” al-ḡawḡiq al-muḡriqah, by Ibn ‘ajar al-Haythamḡ, ch.11, section 1, 247; al-Durr al-manthur, Suyḡḡḡ, vol. VI, 379).

The Messenger of Allāh said the following about ‘Alī: “I swear by Him who holds my life in His hands, this person and his partisans [shī‘ah] will have salvation on the Day of Judgment” (Suyḡḡḡ).

The Messenger of Allāh said, “‘Alī and his Shī‘ah are the successful ones” (Mufīd 25, Muwaffaq). The Prophet said to ‘Alī: “I, you, Fḡimah, al-‘asan, and al-‘usayn were created of the same clay, and our partisans [the Shī‘ites] were created from the remainder of that clay” (Nisḡbḡḡ 101–02; Muḡammad ibn Abḡ al-Qḡsim al-ḡabarḡ 20, 24, 96).

In another tradition, the Most Noble Messenger says that: “I am a tree whose main branch is Fḡimah, whose pollen is ‘Alī, whose fruit is al-‘asan and al-‘usayn, and whose leaves are the Shī‘ites and lovers of my community” (Ibn Ibrḡḡm 222; Muḡammad ibn Abḡ al-Qḡsim al-ḡabarḡ 40, 63).

The Messenger of Allāh said, “Seventy thousand of my community will enter Heaven without any reckoning and punishment against them.” Then he turned to ‘Alī and said, “They are your Shī‘ah and you are their Imām” (Mufīd 26).

The Messenger of Allāh said, “‘Alī, the first four (men) to enter heaven are myself, you, al-‘asan and al-‘usayn. Our progeny [will come] behind us and our loved ones will be behind our progeny. To our right and left will be our Shī‘ah” (Mufīd 26; al-Manḡqib by Aḡmad; al-ḡabarḡḡ, as quoted in al-ḡawḡiq al-muḡriqah, by Ibn ‘ajar Haythamḡ, ch. 11, section 1, 246).

The Messenger of Allāh said, “O ‘Alī! [On the Day of Judgment] you and your Shī‘ah will come toward Allāh well-pleased and well-pleasing, and there will come to Him your enemies angry and stiff-necked” (al-ḡabarḡḡ, on the authority of Imām ‘Alī, al-ḡawḡiq al-muḡriqah, by Ibn ‘ajar al-Haythamḡ, ch. 11, section 1, 236).

The Messenger of Allāh said, “O ‘Alī! On the Day of Judgment, I shall resort to Allāh and you will resort to me and your children will resort to you and the Shī‘ah will resort to them. Then you will see where they carry us [to Paradise]” (Rabḡr by al-Zamakhsharḡ).

Ibn ‘Abbḡs narrated: When the verse “Those who believe and do righteous deeds are the best of the creation” (Qur’ḡn 98:7) was revealed, the Messenger of Allāh said to ‘Alī: “They are you and your Shī‘ah.” He continued: “O ‘Alī! [On the Day of Judgment] you and your Shī‘ah will come toward Allāh well-pleased and well-pleasing, and your enemies will come angry with their head forced up.” ‘Alī said, “Who are my enemies?” The Prophet replied: “He who disassociates

himself from you and curses you. And glad tiding to those who reach first under the shadow of al-‘arsh on the Day of Resurrection.” ‘Alī asked: “Who are they, O the Messenger of Allāh?” He replied: “Your Shī‘ah, O ‘Alī, and those who love you” (al-Ḥafīḥ Jam‘ al-Dīn al-Dharandī, on the authority of Ibn ‘Abbās; al-Ḥawā‘iq al-mu‘riqah by Ibn ‘ajar, Ch. 11, section 1, 246–247).

On the basis of this evidence, we can safely conclude that “Shī‘ism existed in the lifetime of the Prophet as a nascent movement” (Moosa 95). However, while there are discernable Shī‘ite elements during the lifetime of the Prophet, “the hard-and-fast divisions of later centuries are not discernible in the earlier period. There were Sunnī elements with definite Shī‘ite tendencies, and there were Shī‘ite contacts with Sunnī elements both intellectually and socially” (Nār ۱۰۶–۱۰۷) Essays 106–107).

[29](#). Editor’s Note: The word Shī‘ite derives from the Arabic verb shī‘a, meaning “to adhere to; to support a common cause; to be a partisan of it.”

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