

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 Shī'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 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 [*furuq*] in the Christian sense of the world, 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 Shī'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 Shī'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 Ismā'īliyyah,³ for example, have a doctrine which, in many respects, makes them the heirs of the Sabian tradition of Harrān 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 Irak and Persia.⁵

One of the common mistakes made in relation to Shī'ah Islam is the attempt to compare it with the various schisms found in Christianity. Shī'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 *inshī'ah* [division] in the Islamic religion must not be confused with that of *fitnah*, definitive division and irreparable rupture. In fact, Shī'ism suffered no “division” [*inshī'ah*] or rupture [*fitnah*] during the Imāmate of the first three Imāms: 'Alī, Hasan, and Husayn.

After the death of Husayn, however, the majority of Shī'ites placed their trust in 'Alī ibn al-Husayn Zayn al-'Abīdīn,⁶ while a minority, known as al-Kaysaniyyah, believed that the right to succession belonged to Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyyah. He was the third son of 'Alī, but not through Fātimah. As a result, he cannot be considered a descendant of the Prophet.⁷

Despite this fact, Muhammad ibn Hanafiyyah was proclaimed by his partisans as the Fourth Imām and the promised Mahdī. During the time he sought refuge in the mountains of Rawdah, which form a cordillera in Madīnah, Mukhtār al-Thaqafī served as his “representative.”⁸ It was believed that

Muhammad ibn Hanafiyyah would come down one day and appear as the rightly-guided and long-awaited Messiah. In accordance with Shī'ite thought, the Mahdī is a man motivated by God who is also a military chief and a warrior.

Even if the followers of Mukhtār al-Thaqafī gave an extremist character to the eschatological idea of the Hidden Imām, the Islamic figure of the Messiah as restorer of revealed religion is not an invention of Mukhtār or a Christian influence. The Mahdī 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 *ahādīth* of the Prophet as well as many traditions of the Imāms.⁹

In synthesis, we can say that after the death of Imām Zayn al-'Ībidīn, the majority of Shī'ites accepted Muhammad al-Bāqir as the Fifth Imām, despite the fact that a minority followed his brother Zayd al-Shahīd, who were known from that moment on as Zaydīs.¹⁰ Imām Muhammad al-Bāqir was succeeded by his son Ja'far al-Sādiq the Sixth Imām and, after his death, his son Mūsā al-Kāzim was recognized as the Seventh Imām.

Nevertheless, an opposition group insisted that the successor of the Sixth Imām was his elder son Ismā'īl who had died when his father was still alive.¹¹ This group split from the Shī'ite majority and became known as the Ismā'īlīs. Others, instead, preferred 'Abdullāh al-Aftah and some even chose Muhammad, both sons of the Sixth Imām. Still, there were even those who considered Ja'far al-Sādiq as the Last Imām and were convinced that none would succeed him.

Likewise, after the martyrdom of Imām Mūsā al-Kāzim, the majority followed his son 'Alī al-Ridā as the Eighth Imām. But there were those who refused to recognize any Imām after al-Kāzim and came to constitute the brotherhood of the Wāqifiyyah.¹² From the Eighth to the Twelfth Imām, considered by the Shī'ite majority as the Awaited Mahdī, no important division [*inshī'ah*] took place within Shī'ism.

However it occurred, what is important to retain here is that, since its origins, Shī'ite Islam represents, more than a spiritual and political rebellion against illegitimate authority, a movement of “awakening,” like that of Sūfism in the Sunnī 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.

Shī'ite Islam represents an integral restoration of Muhammadan theosophy and metaphysics through the application and practice of all the teachings of the Holy Imāms, who linked the outer meanings of the text to the inner meanings of the divine word.

The root cause for the development of Shī'ism is utterly alien from worldly affairs. The source of Shī'ism is not a simple heresy or a political disagreement. Shī'ite Islam springs from a metaphysical reality, a process of epiphany which establishes a new logophonic manifestation of Prophethood. Shī'ism, as the Islam of 'Alī and the *Ahlul Bayt*, is the temporal and earthly pillar of the eternal and celestial reality of the *wilāyah*.

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 Qur'anic revelation but its closure. The *wilayah* is an unveiling of the esoteric and metaphysical truths found in the Qur'an.

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 Qur'anic 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 Shiism seems to be completely inevitable.

Without its presence, of course, the history of Islam and the world would have totally changed. In our judgment, any attempt to reduce the historical development of Shiism 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 Allah ibn Saba', the Yemenite of Jewish extraction, and as real and historical as Mukhtar al-Thaqafi.

'Abd Allah ibn Saba' and Mukhtar al-Thaqafi are presented by Alessandro Bausani as “extremists” [ghulaf] ¹⁴ and precursors of a political Shiism. Muslim and non-Muslim specialists have long disputed which one deserves the inappropriate title of “founder of Shiite Islam.”

The Italian Orientalist briefly refers to 'Abd Allah ibn Saba' as an exalted personality, an ex-Jewish Yemenite who deified 'Al during his lifetime. The feeble historical foundation surrounding someone considered to be no less than the “founder of Shiite Islam” 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 Shiism as a historical and meta-historical reality profoundly rooted since the dawn of Islam has led certain Orientalists to discard the strongest evidence in favor of the weakest. In reality, 'Abd Allah ibn Saba' is a literary character, a fabrication of Sayf ibn 'Umar al-Zindiq [the Atheist or Dualist], a famous falsifier of *ahadith* or prophetic traditions. ¹⁵

The absence of any convincing evidence to support the existence of 'Abd Allah ibn Saba', partnered with the constantly contradictory and nebulous character of his life, convinced some Shiite 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 'Allāmah Sayyid Murtazā '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 Islāmic origin and to corrupt its genuine Muhammadan 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 Hijrah, during the regime of Mu'awiyah.

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-Khattāb and 'Uthmān—between the years 632 and 656, 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib 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” [*malik*] 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 Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyah, 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-Sibt al-Asghar, 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 *Ahlul 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, Mukhtār'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 Shī'ism.

He was the implacable avenger of Husayn, the standard of the *tawwābīn* [penitents] who consolidated the aspirations of this revolutionary Shī'ite movement whose appearance was motivated by the tragedy of Karbala.²² The *tawwābīn* or penitents constituted the first avenging movement of Karbala. However, as soon as Mukhtār al-Thaqafī appeared on the scene, the *tawwābīn* were assimilated, and perhaps rightfully so, into his brand of revolutionary Messianism.

Regardless of the reason behind Mukhtār's popularity, the question of his religious commitment coincides with the establishment of an initiatory hierarchy which is distinct from the Shī'ite structure. Since Shī'ite thought was already sufficiently delineated, we must say without hesitation that his divergent approach did not arouse much sympathy among the Shī'ites.

The cause for such aversion is to be found in an accidental slip related to Imām Hasan. During his conflict with Mu'awiyah, the Imām sought asylum in Madīn, in the house of the governor Sa'd ibn

Mas'ūd who was Mukhtār's uncle. Unexpectedly and inexplicably, Mukhtār 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 Mukhtār's political blunder which did not go unnoticed by the Shī'ites. They unanimously and severely reproached him for being so inconsiderate and disloyal towards the first son of 'Alī 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 Shī'ites. This occurred when he refused to appear before Ziyād ibn Abih, the Governor of Kūfah, to testify against Hujr ibn 'Adī, the leader of the one of the Shī'ite rebellions to overthrow the tyrant. It seems that, from that moment onwards, Mukhtār adopted a position that was increasingly favorable towards the Shī'ite cause.

At the same time, his revolutionary rhetoric acquired an undeniable messianic character which occasionally resembled revelation. Mukhtār 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 Mukhtār 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.

Mukhtār's ingenious rhetorical slips had a tremendous influence on his followers and convinced them of the appearance of the Awaited Mahdī, identified with Muhammad ibn Hanafiyyah, who was coming to restore order and justice. Due to this deep-rooted Shī'ite conviction, he was considered by his followers as the "Representative of the Mahdī," namely, a delegate of the third son of Imam '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 Imam '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 Imamī Gnosis.

Although Mukhtār's ideas were not free from doctrinal errors, they did not radically alter the esoteric concept of the Hidden Imam 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 Husayn, the martyr of Karbala, was the mission that was thrust upon Mukhtār al-Thaqafī, as well as Sulaymān ibn Surad, 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 Husayn 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 Sūfis, 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 Husayn 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 Kāfah 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 Hasan and the martyrdom of Husayn, the division of the Islamic world into various groups as a result of the bloody raids and forays of Mu'āwiyah 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 Muhammad Bāqir al-Sadr 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 “Shā'ah of 'Alī” and the “Shā'ah of *Ahlul Bayt*”²⁸In Arabic, *shā'ah* means “partisans,” “adepts,” or “followers” of someone.²⁹As 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 [*nass*] made by the Prophet of Imām 'Alī as his successor [*khalīfah*].

1. Editor's Note: This current which seeks to split Shī'ism into fractions has even spread among Muslim scholars.

Sachedina holds that Shī'ism was a political movement which acquired religious undertones (Islāmīc 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 tawhīd 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 Zaydīs: “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 Hadīth al-thaqalayn, and their belief in 'Alī's imāmah after the Messenger of Allāh is of no use” (The Shā'ah 331 Note 1).

This attitude also ignores the similarities between Sunnism, Sūfism, and Shī'ism. As M.G.S. Hodgson explains, “in its whole piety Sunnī Islām can be called half-Shī'ite” (4). Similarly, Nasr observes that “In certain areas of the Islāmīc world...one meets among Sūfis certain groups as devoted to the Shī'ite Imāms, especially 'Alī and Husayn, as any Shī'ite could be, yet completely Sunnī in their practice of the law [*madhhab*]” (Sūfī 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'īlī as the seventh.

4. Editor's Note: Some Ismā'īliyyah adapted the Qarmathian syncretistic catechism to other forms of monotheism, to Harrānīan paganism, and even to Mazdeism (Massignon 60). As 'Allāmah Tabātabā'ī notes, “The Ismā'īlīs 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 Sūbī'īn of the Qur'ān to avoid persecution” (15). Harrān, in what is now southeastern Turkey, was the home of the star worshipping Sabians with their transcendent philosophy. The Sabians of Harrān 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-Sahīfah al-sajadiyyah, 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 Hanafī tribe, rather than from

the Prophet's daughter.

8. Editor's Note: It must always be remembered that, despite his accomplishments, Mukhtar al-Thaqafi was a misguided Muslim who did not recognize the Imam of his Age. In spite of the adventurous almost novelistic appeal of his adventures, Mukhtar was not a righteous man on the straight path. If prophets and Imams are infallible, ordinary human beings like Mukhtar are far from perfect. Although Mukhtar did a great deal of good, and shall always be remembered for avenging the death of al-Husayn, he was misguided in many matters, following Muhammad ibn al-Hanifiyyah as the Mahdi, and falsifying ahadith to serve political purposes. As Ibn al-Jawzi exposes:

Mukhtar al-Thaqafi said to one Ansari: "Invent ahadith on the authority of the Prophet saying that I would be the Caliph after him who would ask vengeance for his (grand)son. If you do so you would receive ten thousand dirhams, a fine dress, an animal to ride and a servant to serve. The man refused to do so on the authority of Prophet but he accepted his offer with less money to fabricate on the authority of the Companion."

Shiite Muslims, as followers of the Twelve Imams, have always opposed and denounced all fabricators of false traditions, even when those traditions are favorable to their cause. Shiite muhadithin categorically reject Mukhtar 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 Mukhtar: he shows him warts and all.

9. Editor's Note: For more English-language books on the Mahdi, consult Shaykh al-Mufid's *Kitab al-Irshad*, *Sachedina's Islamic Messianism; An Inquiry Concerning al-Mahdi* by Ayatullah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and *Discussions Concerning al-Mahdi* by Ayatullah Lutfullah Safi al-Gulpaygan.

10. Editor's Note: The Zaydis are followers of Zayd ibn 'Ali ibn al-Husayn, the son of the Fourth Imam, who led a revolt against the Umayyads and was killed in 738. Initially, the Zaydis held that the true Imam was the Husaynid Imam who rose up in revolt. Many of the Zaydis accepted the Caliphate of 'Abd Bakr and 'Umar, and some even accepted the early part of 'Uthman's.

This attitude was formulated in the theological doctrine of the Imamate of the mafdil [the less excellent]. It was agreed that 'Ali was al-afdal [the most excellent] but conceded that the Imamate of the less excellent could occur when the most excellent did not publicly assert his right to the Imamate by armed revolt. For more on the beliefs of the Zaydis, see Howard's "Introduction" to Shaykh al-Mufid *Kitab al-Irshad* (xxiii-xxv) and *Allamah Tabataba'i's Shiite Islam* (76-77).

11. Editor's Note: Although the sources differ on the subject, Isma'il may not have been qualified for the Imamate for several reasons: firstly, because his father Imam al-Sadiq had appointed Musa as his successor; secondly, because Isma'il passed away before his father; and thirdly, because Isma'il was an alcoholic. The Imamate is not a system of royalty or inheritance. It is a matter of divine pre-ordnance, a covenant from Allah. The tradition from the Sixth Imam, "There was no bad' [lit. "appearance" from ibda which means "to bring about"] for Allah like the bad' in the case of my son Isma'il" (Muzaffar 14) gives the impression that Imam Sadiq appointed his son Isma'il as his successor. Since the Shiites do not believe in bad', namely, God giving the impression of something and then changing it, there are two possibilities here: 1) the tradition in question is false or 2) is to be interpreted as follows:

The meaning of the saying of Imam Sadiq is that Allah has not revealed any matter...in the case of Isma'il (the son of Imam Sadiq), by taking his life before he took his father's. This was so that people would understand that Isma'il was not the Imam, although it had appeared in the situation as if he were, because he was the eldest son. (14)

In any event, the Sixth Imam did not designate his eldest son to be his successor, nor did it cause a great doctrinal or theological problem among the Shi'ah.

12. Editor's Note: The Waqifites were those who held that Musa was the Imam who would return as the Mahdi.

13. Editor's Note: The belief in post-prophetic guidance is not exclusively Shiite. It is related in Sunni traditions that the Messenger of Allah said: "Surely Messengership and Prophethood are terminated, so there will be no messenger or prophet after me except mubashshir" (Tirmidhi). He also stated that: "There is nothing to come of Prophethood except mubashshir." 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 (Bukhari).

14. Editor's Note: Ghulāt, plural of ghali, is an Arabic term deriving from the verb ghala which means "to exaggerate or exceed the proper bounds." The verbal noun is ghuluw and means "exaggeration." The ghulat or extremists are sects which deify 'Ali. In Iran, they are known as the Ahl al-Haqq [people of the truth], 'Ali llahis ['Ali worshippers]: in Iraq they

are called Shabak, Bajwan, Sariyya, Kkaiyya, and Ibrāhīmiyyah.

In Syria, they are known as Nusayris or 'Alawis. In Turkey, they are called Bektashis, Kizilbash (Alevis), Takhtajis and Çepnis. The Shaykhīs are also a modern ghulāt group. They are followers of Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsā'ī (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-Ahsā'ī 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 Shaykhīs resemble the mufawwidah [the delegators]. As Fyzze explains,

The mufawwidah 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 Shaykhīs, it is important to differentiate between the Bahā'ī-controlled group from the original teachings of Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsā'ī. As far as Shī'ism is concerned, there is no doubt that the Imāms are the Lords of Existence. What happens with Ahmad al-Ahsā'ī 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 Bahā'īs 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-Ahsā'ī. 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 Muhammad. If Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsā'ī said that the Imāms controlled the universe, he said so in the sense of prophetic hadīth which states that without an Imām, the world would be destroyed and would not last a single second. There are also other Sunnī and Shī'ite 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 hadīth which states that when Imām Mahdī returns, reason would leave the world and humanity would degenerate into destruction. The work of Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsā'ī needs to be re-examined from a Twelver Shī'ite perspective. This is the only way his scholarship can be saved from Bābī-Bahā'ī 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, Muhammad and 'Alī or, as among the Nusayris, of 'Alī, Muhammad and Salmān al-Fārisī. They practice holy communion and public or private confession. According to Moosa Matti, "[t]heir religion is a syncretism of extreme Shī'ite, 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 Muhammad prophesized 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 to much that they elevated him to an underserved 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" (Nasīb 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 nasībīs are those who love 'Alī too little; 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 Shī'ites* is one of the only scholarly books on extremist Shī'ites 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 Muhammad is the Messenger of Allāh' (99); 2) claiming that the Shī'ites of Iran believe that 'Alī is close to being a God (xxiii); 3) asserting that Sunnism represents Islāmic 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 Sunnī sources, even moderate figures are seen as ghulāt.

[15.](#) Editor's Note: As Nasr explains, "The zanūdiqah [sing. Zindīq] are identified specifically in Islāmic history with Manichaeans, but the word is also used more generally ... to mean unbeliever and heretic" (A Shī'ite Anthology 65, note 125). Saif ibn 'Umar al-Tamīmī is categorically discredited by 'Allīmah Murtazā 'Askarī in his 'Abdullah ibn Saba' and Other Myths, 3rd. ed. trans. M.J. Muqaddas, Tehran: Islāmic Thought Foundation, 1995. Sukaynah bint Husayn, 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 Fātimah Mernessī (192–94).

[16.](#) Editor's Note: Hector Abū Dharr Manzolillo's article "Los 'conversos' 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 Shī'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'ab by Ibn 'Abd al-Barr 4: 1679)

In Sharh ibn Abū Hadīd, 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 Uhud and kicked at the grave of Hamzah [the uncle of the Prophet who was martyred in the Battle of Uhud in fighting against Abū Sufyān] and said: "O Abū Ya'ī! See that the kingdom which you fought against has finally come back to us." (Sharh ibn Abū Hadīd, 16: 136).

When Mu'awiyah took over the Caliphate he said that "I did not fight you to pray, fast, and pay charity, but rather to be your leader and control you" (Tadhkirat al-khawāṣṣ, Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī al-Hanafī, 191–194; Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, in his Sīrah; 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 Islām" (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-Tabarī, Arabic, 13: 2174; Tadhkirat al-khawāṣṣ; Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī al-Hanafī 261). The Caliph Mansūr defiantly declared: "Only I am the authority of God upon His earth" (Jafrī 280; Tabarī, 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 Kabāh and setting it on fire (Dīr al-Tawhīd 139). He enacted the wholesale massacre of the Prophet's Family at Karbala in which Husayn, the second son of 'Alī and Fātimah, was martyred along with his faithful band of 72 followers. Only 'Alī, the son of Husayn, was providentially spared, due to illness.

[21.](#)] Editor's Note: See P. K. Hittī, 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 Hasan to make a treaty with Mu'awiyah, see 'Abbās Ahmad al-Bostānī's Pour une lecture correcte de l'Imam al-Hassan et de son traité de réconciliation avec Mu'awīeh. For an overview of the quietist as opposed to activist approach to politics in Shī'ite Islām, see my "Strategic Compromise in Islām."

[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 Ummayyad rule and deemed that any participation in such activities would lead to the extermination the real bearers of the divine message on earth: he himself and the Ahlul 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-ʿAbidīn. 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 prayer 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 Sahāfat al-kh̄misa, 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 Sahāfat” (xx).

[25.](#) Editor’s Note: The belief in the Invisible Imām is at the heart of Shīʿite Islām.

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

[27.](#) Editor’s Note: The term “Sunnī” came later in Islāmic history. The early Muslims were known as Shīʿites: Shīʿites of ʿAlī, Shīʿites of Muʿawiyah, and so forth. See Jaʿfariyan’s “Shīʿism and its Types during the Early Centuries.”

[28.](#) Editor’s Note: The Messenger of Allāh said: “Glad tidings O ʿAlī! Verily you and your companions and your Shīʿah will be in Paradise” (Sunnī References: Fadāʾil al-sahābah, by Ahmad ibn Hanbal, v. 2, 655; Hilyatul awliyyīn, by Abū Nuʿaym, v. 4, 329; Tārīkh, by al-Khatīb al-Baghdādī, v. 12, 289; al-Awsat, by al-Tabarānī; Majmaʾ al-zawāʾid, by al-Haythamī, v. 10, 21–22; al-Darqutnī, who said, “This tradition has been transmitted via numerous authorities;” al-sawʿīq al-muhriqah, by Ibn Hajar Haythamī, ch. 11, section 1, 247; Durr al-manthūr, Suyūṭī, vol. VI, 379).

The Messenger of Allāh said the following about ʿAlī: “I swear by Him who holds my life in His hands, this person and his partisans [shīʿah] will have salvation on the Day of Judgment” (Suyūṭī). The Messenger of Allāh said: “ʿAlī and his Shīʿah are the successful ones” (Mufīd 25, Muwaffaq). The Prophet said to ʿAlī that “I, you, Fātimah, al-Hasan, and al-Husayn were created of the same clay, and our partisans [the Shīʿites] were created from the remainder of that clay” (Nisābī 101–02; Muhammad ibn Abū al-Qāsim al-Tabarī 20, 24, 96).

In another tradition, the Most Noble Messenger says that: “I am a tree whose main branch is Fātimah, whose pollen is ʿAlī, whose fruit is al-Hasan and al-Husayn, and whose leaves are the partisans [Shīʿites] and lovers of my community” (Ibn Ibrāhīm 222; Muhammad ibn Abū al-Qāsim al-Tabarī 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 ʿAlī and said: “They are your Shīʿah and you are their Imām” (Mufīd 26).

The Messenger of Allāh said: “ʿAlī, the first four to enter heaven are myself, you, al-Hasan and al-Husayn. Our progeny [will come] behind us and our loved ones will be behind our progeny. To our right and left will be our Shīʿah” (Mufīd 26; al-Manʿiqib by Ahmad; al-Tabarānī, as quoted in al-Sawʿīq al-muhriqah, by Ibn Hajar Haythamī, ch. 11, section 1, 246).

The Messenger of Allāh said: “O ʿAlī! [On the Day of Judgment] you and your Shīʿah will come toward Allāh well-pleased and well-pleasing, and there will come to Him your enemies angry and stiff-necked” (al-Tabarānī, on the authority of Imām ʿAlī, al-Sawʿīq al-muhriqah, by Ibn Hajar al-Haythamī, ch. 11, section 1, 236).

The Messenger of Allāh said: “O ʿAlī! 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 Shīʿah will resort to them. Then you will see where they carry us” [to Paradise]” (Rab al-abrār by al-Zamakhsharī). Ibn ʿAbbās narrated: When the verse “Those who believe and do righteous deeds are the best of the creation” (Qurʾān 98:7) was revealed, the Messenger of Allāh said to ʿAlī: “They are you and your Shīʿah.” He continued: “O ʿAlī! [On the Day of Judgment] you and your Shīʿah will come toward Allāh well-pleased and well-pleasing, and your enemies will come angry with their head forced up.” ʿAlī said: “Who are my enemies?” The Prophet replied: “He who disassociates himself from you and curses you. And glad tidings to those who reach first under the shadow of al-ʿarsh on the Day of Resurrection.” ʿAlī asked: “Who are they, O the Messenger of Allāh?” He replied: “Your Shīʿah, O ʿAlī, and those who love you” (al-Hafīz Jamāl al-Dīn al-Dharandī, on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās; al-Sawʿīq al-muhriqah by Ibn Hajar, Ch. 11, section 1, 246–247).

On the basis of this evidence, we can safely conclude that “Shīʿism existed in the lifetime of the Prophet as a nascent

movement” (Moosa 95). However, while there are discernable Shīʿite 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 Shīʿite tendencies, and there were Shīʿite contacts with Sunnī elements both intellectually and socially” (Nasr Sīfī Essays 106–107).

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

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