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Preface

It is particularly welcomed that this new study of the occultation of the Twelfth Imam should be presented to those interested in the history of religion. Indeed, too little attention has been paid to this subject by scholarship generally, and especially in the West. When the matter has been discussed, it has tended to be dismissed rather cursorily. In some measure, Dr. Hussain's work serves to restore the balance.

The author, using little known and rarely consulted early Shi'ite sources, has presented a detailed study of the Imami-Shi'ite movement from the time of Ja'far al-Sadiq, the Sixth Imam, to the end of the lesser occultation of the Twelfth Imam. What emerges is a picture of a secret religious organisation with adherents all over the Islamic world. This organisation had to be secret because it was constantly subject to persecution from the authorities.

The great unifying force of the movement which Dr. Hussain describes was its belief in the Imamate as a central institution to preserve the integrity of Islam. This Imamate would be the means by which justice and equity would be eventually brought to the world. Dr. Hussain demonstrates that the traditions about one of the Imams being the *Mahdi* were circulating among the Shi'a from the very earliest times.

He also establishes that though there was some confusion among the Shi'a as to which Imam would be the *Mahdi*, there was some evidence that traditions existed which said it was to be the Twelfth Imam and that traditions about the Twelfth Imam being the last Imam even found their way into the body of Sunni literature.

For the first time in English, the evidence for the existence of the Twelfth Imam is fully presented and while it is of a circumstantial nature, it is much more convincing than the usual picture presented by Western scholarship. Dr. Hussain's thorough and sympathetic treatment of this is to be greatly welcomed.

The greater occultation of the Twelfth Imam is a matter of religious faith. It, like other great religious beliefs, is not something that scholars can prove or disprove. However, it has an inner religious reality which no one can reject. The proof of this inner religious reality is that it is a doctrine that has sustained and strengthened the faith of millions of Shi'ite Muslims up to the present time. Despite persecution and

tribulation, this community and their faith have survived.

This work of meticulous scholarship by Dr. Hussain is commended to all those interested in the history of the development of Islam and Shi'ism. The work of the Muhammadi Trust, and its tireless secretary in ensuring its publication is particularly appreciated.

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