



## INTRODUCTION

### THE SUNNI–SHI‘I DIVIDE

Shaykh Mufid was a Shi‘i of the Imamiyya, which is also known as the Ithna‘ashariyya or Twelver Shi‘ism. Like the other two main branches of Shi‘ism, the Zaydiyya and the Isma‘iliyya, the Imamiyya had come to be distinguished from mainstream Sunni Islam by its views on the question of authority within the Muslim community.

There were two aspects to this question. The first may be defined as political and concerned the question of leadership of the community and succession to the Prophet, that is to say, the caliphate or, as it was referred to in religious discussions, the imamate. The Sunnis argued that the Prophet had made no provisions for his succession and it was left up to the community to choose and agree upon a successor. They regarded the first four caliphs, including ‘Ali, the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, as rightly guided (*rashidun*) imams whose acts and decisions were binding precedents. They accepted all subsequent caliphs as legitimate, though not necessarily also righteous, rulers. In their view, those caliphs derived their legitimacy from being descended from the Prophet’s tribe of Quraysh and from the fact that they were able to hold the community together and allow Islam to flourish; they (or most of them) did not, however, fulfil the conditions of the rightly guided caliphate, and it

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was not expected that the ideal caliphate could one day be restored.

By contrast, most of the Shi'a believed that 'Ali, who ruled as fourth caliph, had been the only legitimate ruler, and that the caliphate ought to have passed to his descendants from Fatima, the Prophet's daughter. All the other caliphs were regarded as usurpers. The rights of the 'Alids were said to have been based mainly on the Prophet's designation of 'Ali as his successor. According to the Imami Shi'a, those rights were transmitted in a hereditary line of twelve successive imams, eleven of whom had each designated (*nass*) a successor. The twelfth and last of the line, a figure whose very existence was questioned by opponents as he was never seen by outsiders, was believed to have gone into a state of occultation (*ghayba*) in the year 260/874. His return to rule the world as the Mahdi, the Islamic redeemer, will be at the end of time. The fact that of the twelve imams only 'Ali had actually become caliph, and that most of his successors did not actively claim the caliphate, did not invalidate their right to it.

In Isma'ili Shi'ism the line of recognized imams branched off from the Imami line after the sixth imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq, and continued from his son Isma'il down to the Fatimid caliphs (and eventually to their successors). As in Imamism, the Isma'ili line was constituted by the designation of each imam by his predecessor. In Zaydi Shi'ism, on the other hand, any of the descendants of 'Ali and Fatima who laid claim to the imamate and rebelled against the ruling authorities was recognized as rightful imam (provided he had the requisite religious learning).

The other issue over which Sunni and Shi'i Islam were divided was that of religious authority, the authority to define and interpret the revealed law of Islam or the *shari'a* which regulates all aspects of Muslim life. According to both, religious authority was based mainly on knowledge of the Prophet

Muhammad's legacy, the Qur'an and the Sunna, that is, the Prophet's law or practice as preserved in Hadith reports about his words and deeds. But whereas the Sunnis maintained that after the death of the Prophet that authority was dispersed among his companions and followers and eventually came to be held by the religious scholars, most Shi'is asserted that it passed on to 'Ali and the imams after him.

In Imami and Isma'ili Shi'ism the imams were believed to be the most knowledgeable of all Muslims, by virtue of their infallibility (*'isma*), access to divine inspiration (*ilham*), and knowledge (*'ilm*) transmitted exclusively to them from the Prophet. The necessity of having an imam at all times to act as guide to mankind was a fundamental belief in both. In Isma'ilism this belief had a practical aspect in that the line of imams was visible and continuing (in fact, it continues to the present day in the person of the Agha Khan). In Imamism, on the other hand, the necessary existence of the imam was (or, by the early fourth/tenth century, had come to be) a purely theological concept: the twelfth imam, who existed in a state of occultation, was the ultimate and perpetual source of religious authority in this world, but the Imami scholars were the effective holders of that authority, much the same as their Sunni counterparts. The difference was that whereas the Sunni scholars relied on the transmitted statements and views of the Prophet and his revered companions, the Imami scholars relied on the transmitted teachings of their imams, which for them represented the only true version of the Sunna of the Prophet and contained the only true interpretation of the Qur'an.

The Zaydi imam was also looked upon as a religious guide and the most learned member of the community but, unlike the Imami and Isma'ili imams, he was not credited with infallibility or access to divine sources of knowledge. His knowledge was based mainly on Hadith transmitted by other descendants

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of the Prophet, all of whom were believed by Zaydis to have a special ability to acquire and preserve his heritage.

### **IMAMI SHI‘ISM: AN OUTLINE OF MAIN DEVELOPMENTS**

The three Shi‘i traditions described here trace the origins of their doctrines to the time of the Prophet and the early caliphate. Modern research suggests, however, that they did not begin to crystallize as sects with clearly defined ideas about the nature and role of the imamate until much later: the latter part of the second/eighth century in the case of Imami and Zaydi Shi‘ism, and a hundred or so years later in the case of Isma‘ilism. But the roots of Shi‘ism may be located in earlier periods.

#### ***Devotion to the Prophet’s Family***

Support for ‘Ali originated in Kufa, a garrison town in southern Iraq, during the reign of his predecessor, the unpopular third caliph, ‘Uthman. It continued during ‘Ali’s reign as caliph, when he was engaged in conflicts with other members of the ruling elite. During the time of the Umayyad caliphs, when the empire was ruled from Damascus (between 41/661 and 132/749), this support developed into a movement of opposition centered in Iraq. It was characterized by allegiance to the Family of the Prophet (that is, his kinsmen) and the belief that they alone had a legitimate claim to the caliphate. Originally, the Family of the Prophet referred to the whole clan of Hashim (the Prophet’s ancestor), but succession was gradually narrowed down to the ‘Alids, and then to the descendants of the Prophet through ‘Ali and Fatima.

### *Shi'i Messianism*

Shi'ism in the Umayyad period was not only about support for the Prophet's kinsmen as rightful caliphs. Messianic expectations and beliefs, centered on one or the other member of the Family, became rife within it. These did not always differ from the messianic beliefs found among mainstream Muslims. The latter, like the Shi'is, tended to use the name Mahdi (the Rightly Guided One) for the Islamic redeemer and also conceived of him mainly as a political figure who was expected to "fill the earth with justice."

But Shi'i messianism came to be distinguished by two closely related ideas: the "absence" (or occultation) of the Mahdi; and his "return" from death or from a supernatural occultation on earth or in heaven. The circumstances of his return were described in apocalyptic terms. He was often referred to as the Qa'im, a term said to refer to his "rising" from the dead or with the sword. (In Samaritanism the same term denoted the "Standing One," a priestly messiah who never dies.)

### *A Quietist and Legalist Current*

In addition to the messianic currents, there was beginning to emerge within Shi'ism a quietist and scholarly trend centered around certain members of the 'Alid family, who were known to have shunned involvement in politics and occupied themselves with religious learning. The most prominent among them were Muhammad al-Baqir (d. 117/735) and Ja'far al-Sadiq (d. 148/765), who are recognized as the fifth and the sixth Imami imams. These two figures were widely recognized even beyond Shi'i circles for their learning and piety. They had a number of Sunni and Shi'i disciples and pupils who sought their opinion on legal and dogmatic matters. Their importance

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in Imamism is attested by the fact that the bulk of Imami Hadith is traced back to them. Yet it is unlikely that they were regarded as Imami imams, in the sense of sole authority on religious matters, in their own lifetime.

The idea of the imamate as a permanent religious office based on designation and not dependent on actual possession of political power is well attested for the first time in the latter part of the second/eighth century, during the time of Ja'far's son Musa al-Kazim (d. 183/799). Its emergence may be related to the need felt in some pro-'Alid scholarly circles to shed the messianic legacy of Shi'ism and redefine it along new lines. After the advent of the 'Abbasid dynasty there were a number of messianically inspired revolts against it by 'Alids or their supporters, all of which ended in failure. Many 'Alid Shi'is would have soon realized that insurrection and bloodshed were not going to lead anywhere and that a change of dynasty was not likely to bring about any significant change in government. For some scholars a depoliticized Shi'ism would have been one way of accommodating themselves to the reality of 'Abbasid rule and, at the same time, maintaining their devotion to the 'Alids. Ja'far's and his father Muhammad's quietism and their interest in scholarship would have helped to promote the idea that this line of 'Alids was endowed with a special ability to transmit the heritage of the Prophet. Moreover, in some scholarly circles the existence within Islam of divergent opinions on numerous questions of law and dogma was perceived as something of a problem. The Imami imamate was presented to Muslims as the answer to divergence.

By the third/ninth century Imamism had spread from Iraq to several towns of eastern Iran (Nishapur, Tus, Samarqand) and western Iran (Rayy, Qumm, Nihawand, Hamadan, and Qazwin). It remained though the religion of a small minority until the tenth/sixteenth century when the Safavid dynasty of Iran made it the state religion.

The quietism advocated in Imamism may in the long run have helped its communities to survive in main centers of the Islamic empire and in the midst of predominantly Sunni populations. But it did not protect Imamis from attack or prevent their imams from being suspected of plotting to seize power and kept under house arrest. The usual pretext for their Sunni attackers was that Imamism vilified the first three caliphs and other companions of the Prophet who did not recognize 'Ali's claims, that is to say, those whom the Sunnis regarded as the pious founders of the community. To protect themselves against such hostility, Imamis found refuge in the idea of precautionary dissimulation (*taqiyya*), that a Muslim is allowed to conceal his faith if by revealing it he would be subjecting himself to danger or persecution. In time this idea became a fundamental element of Imami belief.

### *Early Imami Doctrine of the Imamate*

By comparison with classical Imamism (viz., Imamism as the set of beliefs that had emerged by the end of the third/ninth century and that remained the basis of all later formulations), early Imami doctrine of the imamate was a very moderate one. It was based on two related ideas: that the revelation to the Prophet Muhammad, then conceived strictly as the Qur'an and its interpretation, was a complete and perfect source of the religious law; and that the continued existence of a single line of infallible and divinely guided imams guaranteed the perfect transmission of that knowledge. It was said that each imam received that knowledge through transmission from his predecessor (and, in the case of 'Ali, from the Prophet), and divine guidance insured that he did not err in its transmission. At first, the imam was not thought to be in receipt of additional divinely imparted knowledge (*ilham*). On the contrary, early Imamis

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adhered strictly to the view that all divine communication came to an end with the death of the Prophet.

### *The Threat of Extremism*

By the early part of the third/ninth century Imamism was already beginning to face a threat to its existence as a moderate expression of Shi'ism from individuals and groups preaching gnostic or quasi-gnostic doctrines. Gnostic currents had flourished in Iraq and Iran in late antiquity and were now resurfacing mainly in Shi'ism. The central idea in gnosticism was that the salvation of the human soul was from the material world and lay in the acquisition of esoteric or secret knowledge about its divine origins and destiny. This could be achieved by recognizing a savior who was usually conceived of as an incarnation of a celestial being or of the divine essence, and whose role was essentially that of awakener and revealer of gnosis.

Imami scholars who looked upon the imam as the highest legal authority were vehemently opposed to the casting of the imam in the role of gnostic savior. What concerned them particularly was that the gnostics were inclined to dismiss the religious law as irrelevant to the attainment of salvation. Although in Imamism belief in the imams was deemed to be essential for salvation, this was not a spiritualist doctrine. It was, rather, part of the belief that salvation was through the law and the only true version of the law was that transmitted by the imams.

The legalist scholars were also opposed to any conception of the imam that could undermine the belief in the cessation of prophecy after Muhammad or that entailed a belief in the possibility of incarnation. Furthermore, and as far as we can tell, early Shi'i gnostic doctrines focused on a single imam/savior figure and did not include recognition of the Imami principle of a permanent imamate or continuous line of

imams. (The gnostics would single out one of the Imami or other 'Alid imams and cast him as a prophet or divine incarnation and the source of all the esoteric and saving knowledge in their hands.) This too would have been unacceptable to the Imami legalists. They labeled the gnostics as "exaggerators" (*ghulat*) and responded to the threat of their appeal by writing and publishing refutations of their doctrines.

The war that Imami legalists waged on the gnostic currents was, by and large, successful. It was successful in that gnostic concepts of salvation did not become part of Imami doctrine, and the emphasis remained on the authority of the law. However, by the end of the third/ninth century many other beliefs about the imams, which had previously been associated with Shi'i gnostics and messianists, began to appear (usually in modified form) in the Imami literature. This literature shows that the imams had come to be credited with a preexistence and an elevated spiritual status. Supernatural knowledge and an ability to perform miracles were also attributed to them. Older and much more moderate ideas about their role, knowledge, and nature were almost completely overshadowed. (With regard to the modern scholarly debates concerning the nature of early Imamism and the course of its development, referred to in the Preface, the other two main views, which differ from the one followed here and elsewhere in this book, may be mentioned: that esoteric/gnostic currents existed within early Imamism and influenced its conception of the imamate from the beginning; and (a more recent view) that Imamism originated as an esoteric doctrine and began to shed this legacy after the disappearance of the twelfth imam and under the influence of scholars whose interests were mainly in law and theology.)

As for the gnostics, they were more successful in propagating their teachings and their doctrine of salvation away from the main centers of Imami learning, from which they were

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gradually pushed out. Their separateness from Imamism was reflected in their adoption of variant lines of imams and non-Imami imams for their savior figures and, as in the case of the early Isma'ilis, in their espousal of an ideology of messianic activism.

*The Occultation of the Twelfth Imam*

Another doctrine that had been associated with non-Imami Shi'is and was adopted by Imamis in the later third/ninth century was the doctrine of occultation and return of the Mahdi. As we have said, this doctrine had its origins among messianic Shi'i groups. It had also been adopted by Imami splinter groups who decided that the line of imams had come to an end and applied the doctrine to the seventh imam whom they regarded as the last of the line. Sometime after the death of the eleventh imam, the Imami leadership announced that he had been succeeded by a young son and that the latter was now in hiding due to the threat to his life from the ruling authorities. Those who disagreed and voiced other views about the identity and/or role of the next imam (the sources report twelve or fourteen such groups) were portrayed as deviant. At first it was implied that his absence was going to be temporary and his return as the Mahdi within his lifetime. But gradually this became an event which would take place at the end of time.

Modern historians have related the adoption by Imamism of the doctrine of the Mahdi to the atmosphere of revolt and heightened messianic expectations, which prevailed at that time. The Imami leaders themselves had an interest in stable government and were opposed to revolt. A number of them were employed at court and in the administration as secretaries and even viziers, and acted as patrons and protectors to

scholars. But many of their followers would have been attracted to the idea of their imam as the awaited Mahdi and perhaps even eager to engage in action on his behalf. In those circumstances the leadership could not afford to be seen as failing to support the imam. The idea of a hidden imam/Mahdi whose appearance could be postponed indefinitely would have seemed to be a good solution, especially when coupled, as it was, with the stipulation that any political action in his absence and without his openly declared consent was unlawful.

At first it was suggested that the hidden imam was in touch with his community through a number of trusted disciples. But the situation was exploited by extremist leaders who could now claim that they were conveying the wishes and teachings of the imam without the threat of being denounced by the imam himself. The moderate leadership in Baghdad responded by declaring that contact between the imam and his community had been taking place strictly through a series of sole representatives or mediators (*safirs*) and by recognizing one of their number as the current mediator. But the leadership could not continue to support the claims of its chosen mediators, especially at a time when doubts were being raised about the continued existence of the imam beyond a natural lifespan. Thus, the institution was abandoned and the idea that gained most acceptance among scholars was that the imam had passed into a “greater occultation” and that all communication with him had come to an end in the year 329/941. The idea suggests that it was by now clear to leaders and scholars, though perhaps not to the rank and file, that his absence would be permanent.

Another factor in the adoption of the doctrine of the occulted Mahdi may have been a gradual erosion of the status of the imamate. The sources report that after the death of each

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imam there were disagreements about the identity of his successor. The claims of an imam were often contested by a brother or an uncle. Two of the imams were minors when their fathers died, which led to all sorts of theoretical problems. For example, some Imamis questioned whether obedience to a minor was possible. Others said that the accession of a minor invalidates the belief in the perfect transmission of the Prophet's legacy. Moreover, Imami scholars had already emerged as, or perhaps they had always been, the actual religious leaders in their local communities, in which case the transition to living without an imam would not have been so difficult.

The difficulty lay in how to explain this turnaround, from Imamism to Twelverism; from insisting on the necessity of having an imam at all times to recognition that the imam of the time was absent and out of the reach of ordinary mortals; from the belief that he will lead the community as the Mahdi and redresser of injustices in the near future and that other imams will succeed him to the belief that he was the last of the line and that his appearance will be at the end of time. The changes produced confusion in the minds of the believers and doubts about the existence of the imam. Imami scholars spoke of this period in their history as the period of "perplexity" and they devised a number of arguments in order to justify the occultation and its prolongation. But although eventually the believers were convinced, outsiders continued to attack Imamis for what they saw as an intrinsic contradiction in their doctrine: the necessity of the imamate, and the occultation of the imam of the time, or how an imam whose role as guide was deemed to be necessary can ever be absent. Imami treatises devoted to the justification of the occultation were still being written well into the fifth/eleventh century. As we shall see, Mufid made significant contributions to this debate.

### *Imami Literature*

Everything we know about early Imamism comes from the writings of its scholars and from reports about their views and the debates they conducted with other Muslims. The imams themselves are unlikely to have left behind any writings. (The ascription to them of a number of extant Imami works is unlikely to be genuine and was sometimes contested within Imamism itself.) Moreover, there is no reliable way of assessing the authenticity of the large body of Imami Hadith, the orally transmitted statements of the imams and reports about them believed by Imamis to preserve their actual words and teachings. The extent of the imams' contribution to the emergence and development of Imami doctrine is, thus, difficult to determine.

The literature that was produced by scholars before the occultation consisted mostly of short treatises which dealt with single topics of law or dogma, especially those disputed between Imamis and their opponents. There were also polemical treatises against other Shi'i and non-Shi'i sects. Most of this literature is not extant. We know something about it from quotations in later works and from the bibliographical dictionaries that were produced by later Imamis. A partial explanation as to why it did not survive is that in view of the major changes that Imamism underwent, much of the writings of earlier scholars would have become redundant; they either ceased to be copied, or were incorporated into later works, after being modified and updated.

The literature that appeared between the end of third/ninth century and the middle of the fourth/tenth was devoted to the definition, defense, and propagation of Twelver Imami doctrine. In addition to works on the imamate and the occultation, it included heresiographies (works on Islamic "sects and

doctrines”) and polemical treatises against other Shi‘is. The heresiographers described divisions in Shi‘ism up to the time of the twelfth imam and presented them as deviations from an original doctrine, which they deemed to be identical with Imamism and in existence since the time of the Prophet and ‘Ali. (As must be clear by now, such presentations reflected a traditional view of authority, not historical reality.) They also described the current divisions that existed among Imamis over the identity and role of the twelfth imam, including the position of their own sect, the Imamiyya.

But the most authoritative works were the collections of Imami Hadith, deemed by Imamis to be the only true representation of the Sunna of the Prophet. One of the earliest collections, which is still regarded as one of four authoritative Imami collections, is that entitled “The Sufficient [Work] in the Science of Religion” by Muhammad ibn Ya‘qub al-Kulini (d. 329/941). It was arranged according to the usual order of topics found in Sunni works of jurisprudence and Hadith. In addition to chapters on ritual purity, prayer, marriage, divorce, pilgrimage, and so on, which parallel those in Sunni works, it included a chapter on theology (“divine unity”) and a long chapter on the imamate. It was put together in Baghdad and was said to have taken twenty years to complete. Much of its material was collected from narrators of Hadith from the Iranian city of Qumm, which had been a Shi‘i center since the early Islamic period and growing in importance as a center of Imami learning during the third/ninth century.

### ***Traditionalism and Rationalism***

As its title indicates, Kulini’s Hadith collection was intended as a complete record of the laws, dogmas, and ethical teachings of Imamism. It reflected the traditionalist attitude that had been

characteristic of early Imamism and was still prevalent in the period of the “lesser occultation.” This attitude was based on the idea that the Islamic revelation, as taught by the imams, contained all the laws and dogmas that mankind needed, and that the task of the scholar was merely to *find* those laws and dogmas from the corpus of Imami Hadith, not to *derive* or *formulate* new ones. Imami scholars maintained that juristic activity, as practised by Sunni and other scholars who believed themselves to be authorized to derive God’s law from the Qur’an and Prophetic Hadith, was misguided, fallible, and superfluous.

This traditionalism became increasingly difficult to uphold after the onset of the “greater occultation” when all contact between the imam and his community was said to have come to an end. There soon began to appear attempts to admit a role for reason and interpretation. In the field of theology the use of reason provoked a negative reaction from Qummi scholars and their leading spokesman Abu Ja’far Muhammad ibn Babuya al-Qummi (d. 381/991), who was one of Mufid’s teachers. But the rationalizing current that he was eager to arrest was to receive a boost at the hands of Mufid. The controversy between them on the role and legitimacy of theological inquiry and debate and the background to it will be discussed in Chapter 5.

In the legal sphere we witness the emergence of jurisprudence as an Imami discipline and a movement away from the idea that the transmitted body of Imami Hadith was a clear and sufficient expression of the law. The development generated debates and disputes within Imamism as to how, on what basis, and to what extent the scholars were authorized to define the law in the absence of the imam. Mufid’s contribution to the development of jurisprudence will be discussed in Chapter 6.