

## An Introduction to Islam

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Islam is the world's fastest growing faith but it is one of the least well understood. It traces its heritage from ancient Semitic sources through Judaism and Christianity, and is therefore part of the Abrahamic monotheistic tradition. Muslims believe that Muhammad was the last prophet in a line which includes Jesus, Moses and the other Judaic prophets whose exploits are recorded in the Torah and Bible. His message is therefore not essentially different to that of earlier prophets but a reminder of the original Abrahamic message corrupted over time by the practitioners of Judaism and Christianity. Muhammad received God's message in a series of revelations in the early 7th century AD. These revelations in rhyming Arabic prose are gathered together in the Qur'an in order of length rather than the order that they were received. They include historical, legal, didactic and eschatological material which forms the basis for Islamic law and ritual practice. The relationship between prophet and revelation in Islam is closer to that in Judaism than in Christianity. Whilst Jesus is believed to be the son of God, the living incarnation of revelation and the Bible a record of this, Muhammad is the vessel through which revelation, in the form of the Qur'an, passed. Muhammad plays a similar role to the Virgin Mary in Christianity and the Qur'an a similar role to Jesus. Additional sources such as the Hadith (sayings of the Prophet) and Sira (biographies of the Prophet) provide materials more similar to the Gospels.

The historical profile of Islam is very different to that of Christianity. Islam was only briefly the faith of an oppressed minority and therefore had no need to separate the spheres of God and Caesar. Muhammad, a Meccan merchant, and his first followers did endure persecution by the Meccan aristocracy, whose control of the pagan Semitic shrine in the city they challenged, but within a few years of migrating to the nearby town of Medina, Muhammad was able to militarily defeat the Meccans and impose Islam on the

Hijaz. This meant that in its formative phase, Islam was the faith of an elite who considered political and military success as proof of its veracity and Divine favour. The success of Muslim armies first in the Arabian peninsula and then across the Near East convinced those they conquered that this was indeed so, creating a triumphant self-confident cult very different from early Christianity. The political character of early Islam also means that the faith's fragmentation into sects frequently had its roots in political conflicts rather than in doctrinal disputes. The great division between the majority Sunni Muslim community and the minority Shi'a, for instance, developed out of a debate as to the correct mode of succession after the death of the Prophet in 631 AD. Conversely, political opposition frequently used religious language or took the form of religious deviation.

### The Rise of Islam

Islam emerged in the western Arabian peninsula in the early 7th century when the Byzantine and Sasanian empires shared control of the Near East. The major religions of the time were Byzantine Christianity in its many forms, Sasanian Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Manichaeism which fused elements of all the former faiths. The tribes of the Arabian peninsula were mostly pagan but exposed to Jewish, Byzantine, Ethiopic and Sasanian influences which passed along the trade route linking Syria and the Yemen by way of Mecca. This city was both a commercial and cult centre. At its heart stood the Ka'ba, a cube-shaped sanctuary housing a black meteorite fragment, the famous black stone, and the statues of numerous pagan Semitic deities. This complex was considered a haram, a sacred space where no weapons or violence were permitted. The existence of a space where tribal feuds and other forms of violence were prohibited enabled tribesmen to trade and Mecca was the site of a huge annual fair. The Ka'ba sanctuary was controlled by the Quraysh, a powerful tribe also deeply involved in trade.

Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, was a member of the Banu Hashim clan of the Quraysh but his membership of the elite was compromised by the early death of his parents and his adoption by his uncle. When he attained maturity he gained employment as commercial agent for a wealthy widow, Khadija, whom he subsequently married. He travelled regularly to Syria, where he seems to have come into close contact with Jewish and Christian religious leaders. He became involved in a small Meccan group who called themselves Hanifs, a term denoting someone who subscribed to Abrahamic monotheism without being either Jewish or Christian. The Hanifs used fasting and retreat to the desert to draw close to God and it was during a retreat of this kind that Muhammad's revelations began in the form of a visit from the angel Gabriel ordering him to recite. Henceforth he received revelations on an irregular basis for several years.

After an initial period of trauma and soul-searching, Muhammad decided that his revelations were the authentic Word of God. His first converts were his wife, Khadija, and his cousin, Ali. Other family members and friends followed suit and then Muhammad started to preach to the population of Mecca. The thrust of his argument was that the Ka'ba was really a monotheistic sanctuary dedicated to Abraham, the twin of Jerusalem, and that it was being defiled by the idols to non-existent deities placed within it. There was no god but God and worship should not be a process of buying off tribal gods but devotion to the one true God of Abraham by prayer, fasting and good works in the community. This message appealed to the under-privileged in Mecca but infuriated the Quraysh and other members of the mercantile elite who relied on the revenues from the shrine and the trade associated with it. The hostility of the Quraysh initiated a migration of Muslims out of Mecca to Ethiopia then Medina and culminated in an attempt to assassinate Muhammad. He narrowly escaped to Medina in 622, the starting date for the Muslim Hijri calendar, and set about constructing an ideal religious and political community.

The population of Medina consisted of pagans, Muslims and a large Jewish population whom Muhammad assumed would convert. It was a great disappointment to him that the majority of the Arabian Jews

rejected Islam. This perceived betrayal generated considerable hostility between the Muslim and Jewish camps in Medina and Muhammad's alteration of the Muslim direction of prayer from the Temple in Jerusalem to the Ka'ba in Mecca. As relations with the Jews deteriorated Muhammad began to mobilise the Muslim community for war: war to reconquer Mecca and the Ka'ba, the Abrahamic shrine central to Islam, war to reduce the Jewish tribes and war to bring other Arabian tribes under Muslim control. Although Muhammad clearly wished to secure converts it is important to recognise that he insisted on preaching and inviting groups to convert before attacking, and generally used military tactics judiciously and defensively. The small size of the early community necessitated such an approach. In early engagements with the Meccans, the Muslim army was routinely much smaller than the Meccan force and secured victory through luck and clever tactics rather than brute force. However, such Muslim victories against the odds played an important role in building the confidence of the new community and persuading the Arabian tribes that Muhammad was the messenger of God. The balance gradually tipped and by 630, the Muslims were strong enough to advance on Mecca which capitulated with minimal resistance. The majority of Muhammad's old Qurayshi enemies converted to Islam and a new era began.

It was between 622 and the Prophet's death in 631 that the cluster of ritual practices known as the Five Pillars of Islam emerged, at least in prototype. The pillars consist of:

1. the Shahada or profession of faith, the statement of belief that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is his messenger,
2. the Salat, the five daily prayers at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and evening which have set formulae,
3. the Sawm, the fast between sunrise and sunset during the holy month of Ramadan,
4. the Hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca during the month of Dhu'l-Hijja which each Muslim should perform once in his or her lifetime resources permitting,
5. payment of Zakat, alms to provide for the indigent, orphaned, widowed, travellers and those fighting for the faith.

During this period the Qur'an remained oral and was supplemented by orally transmitted accounts of what the Prophet said and did in various circumstances, these accounts are known as the Hadith. Together Qur'an and Hadith provided the basic materials for the later elaboration of Islamic law, ritual practice and theology.

### The Succession to the Prophet

The Prophet died after a short illness in Mecca in 631. Although he had several daughters of whom the most senior was Fatima, wife of his cousin, 'Ali, he left no sons. His only direct male descendants were the two sons of Fatima and 'Ali, Hasan and Husayn, who were children at the time. To complicate the situation further, Muhammad had given no indication as to how the community should be led after his death. He was the Prophet, the source of revelation and therefore unique but the community needed leadership of some kind. By this time there were several factions within the Muslim community: the Muhajirun, early Meccan converts who had migrated to Medina; the Ansar, Medinan converts who had received and assisted the migrants; and later Meccan converts. These groups had different views as to the correct mode of succession but three main possibilities presented themselves. Firstly, some kind of elective leadership directed by religious criteria such as proximity to the Prophet, early conversion, and proven dedication to Islam. Secondly, the maintenance of leadership in the Prophet's family by the appointment of 'Ali. Thirdly, a shift of leadership back to the Meccan tribal aristocracy who considered their conversion, albeit late, sufficient to restore them to power.

In the event, a small group of early Muslim converts gathered and decided that Abu Bakr, a very early

convert and close friend of the Prophet, should become khalifa, a term meaning 'deputy' rendered as caliph in English. Although there were grumbles of discontent, the choice of Abu Bakr was a good one and basically uncontested. His title indicated the nature of his role, custodianship of Muhammad's community in his absence. He interpreted this as meaning the consolidation of the community by directing its martial energies outwards and the fulfilment of Muhammad's last wish, the conquest of Jerusalem. The result was a series of wars to fully conquer the Arabian peninsula followed by initial raids into Syria. Warfare against non-Muslims had the dual advantage of forcing the Muslims to work together and rewarding them in the form of booty of which a fifth belonged to the 'state'.

Abu Bakr died in 634 but his brief caliphate set the tone for the ensuing years and placed the Muslims on the path of conquest which took them to either end of the known world, Spain and China, within less than a century. Like Abu Bakr, the next three caliphs, 'Umar, 'Uthman and 'Ali, were similarly chosen by elective means but the tensions generated by different opinions as to who should rule intensified as the empire expanded and the stakes grew higher. Between 631 and 'Ali's death in 661, Muslim Arab armies conquered Syria, Mesopotamia (636), Egypt (642) and advanced into Iran and Khurasan. All three caliphs were eminent Muslims but their networks of affiliations varied. 'Umar, like Abu Bakr, was an early convert who had been close to the Prophet whose appointment was generally accepted. He was unfortunately murdered by a slave in 644. His successor, 'Uthman had similar credentials but was a member of an aristocratic clan of the Quraysh, the Banu Umayya, which contained many late converts to Islam. He appointed many of these people to important positions in the empire and was assassinated by a disgruntled deputation from Egypt in 656. He was succeeded by 'Ali. The shocking murder of 'Uthman and succession of 'Ali marked the start of a period of intense conflict known as the Fitna (civil wars) which set in place the divisions which culminated in the splintering of Islam into Sunni and Shi'i parts.

### The Fitna

Many eminent Muslims contested the appointment of 'Ali as the next caliph and he was forced to fight a coalition led by Muhammad's favourite wife, 'Aysha. He defeated his opponents at the Battle of the Camel, but the fact that he had to fight to secure his position boded ill for the future. Soon he faced a challenge from the Meccan aristocracy headed by Mu'awiya, a member of the Banu Umayya and governor of Syria, who used the pretext that 'Ali had not properly punished his kinsman for 'Uthman's assassination to challenge him for power. The armies of 'Ali and Mu'awiya met in northern Syria at Siffin. Although the battle itself was indecisive, Mu'awiya emerged as the victor. During the course of the battle he called for arbitration. 'Ali agreed to prevent the spilling of Muslim blood but thereby recognised Mu'awiya as an equal rather than as a rebel against the rightful caliph. Worse still, the arbitration resulted in the de facto division of the empire by granting Mu'awiya autonomous control of Syria. To compound the problem, a section of 'Ali's army defected, scandalised that he had stooped to negotiation, and formed a radical break away sect known as the Kharijis. 'Ali retreated to southern Iraq and tried to hold the fragmenting empire together only to be assassinated by a Khariji in the Great Mosque of Kufa in 661.

'Ali's death revived the issue of the succession. Many felt that now that the caliphate was in the Prophet's family it should stay there and that 'Ali's eldest son, Hasan, should become caliph. This amorphous group was called the Shi'at 'Ali, the Party of 'Ali, and was the seed from which Shi'ism eventually grew.

Mu'awiya, representative of the old Meccan aristocracy, was, however, the most powerful man in the empire. He duly proclaimed himself caliph and 'persuaded' Hasan to renounce any claim to power. Hasan's death soon after removed the threat but deepened the hostility of the Shi'at 'Ali who considered it suspicious. The caliphate of Mu'awiya signalled the return of the Arab tribal aristocracy to power and a shift of the capital from the Hijaz to Syria. Mu'awiya was highly competent and a period of stability and expansion ensued but the question of who would succeed him remained. Just before his death in 680 he made his son, Yazid, the heir apparent. The latter was subsequently recognised by the Syrian armies on

his father's death thereby establishing the first dynastic caliphate in Islamic times, the Umayyad caliphate. The Shi'at 'Ali and many other Muslims considered the shift from elective to hereditary rule illegitimate and its appropriation by a lineage other than that of the Prophet completely unacceptable. The stage was set for another round of conflict.

This time the players were 'Ali's second son, Husayn and the new Umayyad caliph, Yazid. The clash occurred in Iraq at a place called Karbala in 681. Husayn had a small devoted following and several members of his family with him and was no match for the Umayyad army led by one of Yazid's generals. The Umayyads surrounded the beleaguered Alid contingent, cut off their water sources and then massacred them. News of the massacre of Husayn, grandson of the Prophet, sent shock waves throughout the Islamic world and was generally denounced by all regardless of their political affiliations. Politically it ended the Fitna and consolidated the position of the Umayyads but the cost was high. Despite their political and cultural achievements, Muslims have always viewed the Umayyads with ambivalence as the lineage which murdered the grandson of the Prophet and sundered the religious unity of Muslim community. In the following centuries, the Shi'at 'Ali launched several unsuccessful bids for power. At the same time, the lineal descendants of Husayn emerged as figureheads and religious leaders of the movement, the so-called imams. They gradually developed a theology distinct from that of the Sunni majority transforming Shi'ism from a political opposition movement into a religious sect.

### The Development of Religious Thought and Practice

The emergence of separate Sunni and Shi'i doctrines occurred very slowly and the line between them was blurred for many centuries. In the early Islamic centuries religious belief and practice was relatively unified: different groups were identified by their specific attitudes to religious and political leadership rather than by differences in praxis. Early Islam was simple and egalitarian. It had no clergy: religious authorities were simply Muslims recognised for their knowledge and piety and any male Muslim could lead the communal prayer. The key issues for early religious scholars were the preservation of the Qur'an and Hadith, and their elaboration to provide answers to the growing number of questions Muslims had regarding their faith. The Qur'an was committed to paper in the caliphate of 'Uthman, but recitation remained a crucial form of transmission. The qurrah or reciters were therefore an important category of early scholar. A second group were the muhaddithun, the collectors of Hadith who travelled all over the Islamic world in search of Hadith and developed methods of authentication based on the reliability of each Hadith's chain of authorities (isnad). Other scholars concentrated on elaboration of the Qur'an and the Hadith to provide answers to the many questions presented to them. Such specialists, exegetes and legists (fuqaha') formed the embryonic group from which the great jurists of Islam emerged.

These early religious scholars were primarily concerned with the exoteric aspects of faith: the correct form of prayer, how to perform ablutions, good market practice, inheritance and punishment of criminal activity. They were devout men concerned with spiritual matters but the exigences of empire demanded the rapid consolidation of the still young tradition, the careful preservation of its key texts and the basic education of converts. Islamic law, the Shari'a, was therefore the first area of religious thought to develop. The word shari'a means a 'path' or 'way' and Muslims considered Islamic law to be an exposition of the way they should lead their lives. The Shari'a was never, however, a law code in the sense of the Napoleonic Code, it was a collection of rulings, practical and theoretical, made by jurists based on their understanding of the Qur'an and Hadith. Originally there were numerous schools of law each named after the jurist considered to have been its founding authority. Today there are five law schools, four Sunni and one Shi'i. The oldest school is the Maliki school based on the work of Malik b. Anas of Medina. The second is the Hanafi school which derives its name from the Kufan jurist, Abu Hanifa. Then there is the school of al-Shafi'i, a student of Malik who developed the methodology of Islamic law, and the Hanbali school named after Ibn Hanbal of Baghdad. The Shi'i school is called the Ja'fari school after Ja'far al-

Sadiq, the sixth Shi'i imam (d.765).

Islamic theology started to emerge during the early 'Abbasid caliphate when the caliphs sponsored an extensive translation programme of Greek texts into Arabic. The corpus of Greek knowledge henceforth accessible to the Arabs included many of the major works of Greek philosophy which had been preserved by the Byzantines. Works by Plato, Aristotle and the Neoplatonists provided Muslim scholars with a new conceptual framework. The result was the development of new schools of thought such as Mu'tazilism. The Mu'tazila believed that philosophical questions should be addressed using rational argument. They are best known for their belief that the Qur'an was created, a position rejected by the majority of scholars who insisted that it was an eternal document transmitted to Muhammad at the appropriate time. Mu'tazilism was superseded by scholastic theology, known in Arabic as kalam, which investigated concepts such as causation, first principles and the relationship between God and man. The basic source for theological speculation was the Qur'an which the theologians analysed using typically Greek tools – logic (mantiq), dialectic and grammatical exegesis (nahw).

The most renowned master of kalam was the scholar, al-'Ashari (873-935) whose statement of belief ('aqida) became the standard Sunni position during the Saljuq sultanate. Al-'Ashari adopted the tools of the Mu'tazila but rejected their position vis-à-vis the Qur'an and insisted that dialectic could not be applied to the acts of God because God was incomprehensible to man. A major issue for al-'Ashari and other religious scholars of the time was the issue of predestination and man's relationship to God. Al-'Ashari reconciled the all-powerful nature of God with human free will by arguing that God initiates all actions but that humans acquire them and therefore become responsible for them. This doctrine is called the doctrine of acquisition (kasb). He also insisted that God could send the righteous to hell if he so wished. This was a major difference between al-'Ashari and one of his contemporary theologians, al-Maturidi, who argued that reward and punishment were connected to an individual's actions. The 'Ashari school later accepted this position.

### The Development of Shi'ism

Although Shi'ism had its roots in the dispute over the mode of succession which followed the death of the Prophet, the ideas of the Shi'at 'Ali quickly gained a religious dimension. By the mid-8th century, if not earlier, the Shi'at 'Ali justified their attachment to the line of the Prophet via 'Ali in terms of the inherent charisma of this lineage, believing that one individual in each generation was the imam. Frequently, they also believed in the messianic qualities of the individuals recognised as imams. This emphasis on charisma rendered purely hereditary succession impossible because not all an imam's sons possessed it. It therefore became the norm for imams to designate their successors. As mentioned above in the section on the 'Abbasid Revolution, the problem in this approach to religio-political leadership was that the identity of the imam was contested with different groups selecting different imams. The 'Abbasid Revolution which brought the descendants of the Prophet's uncle to power rather than the descendants of 'Ali, much to the disgust of many of the Shi'at 'Ali, clearly demonstrated this problem.

A crucial figure in the evolution of mainstream Imami or Twelver Shi'ism was Ja'far al-Sadiq, the sixth imam and the codifier of Shi'i law, because his interpretation of law shifted the issue of authority within Islam from the political to the religious sphere. The Sunnis considered the Qur'an and the Sunna, the practice of the Prophet recorded in the Hadith as the end of revelation. When matters not addressed in these sources arose, religious scholars should use their knowledge to draw analogies (qiyas) and come up with opinions as to the correct course of action. These opinions gained validity when they gained the consensus (jama'a) of other scholars. The majority of Muslims accepted this position and were called the ahl al-sunna wa'l-jama'a (the people of the Sunna and consensus) of which Sunni is an abbreviation. Ja'far al-Sadiq elaborated the view that the line of 'Ali was as an additional source of revelation, a natural

development given the Shi'at 'Ali's emphasis on charisma. Ja'far argued that Muhammad had passed on esoteric knowledge to 'Ali who had passed it to Hasan and Husayn. Henceforth the one male in each generation in the line of Husayn designated as 'imam' by his predecessor was the living continuation of revelation. The imam could override the Qur'an and Sunna and acted as a supplementary source of law.

As Shi'i theology became more complex, the Shi'a also attributed infallibility and sinlessness to the imams. Shi'i belief in the semi-divine status of the imams and their rightful headship of the Islamic community was viewed as seditious by the Sunni 'Abbasid establishment who sporadically embarked on persecutions of those believed to harbour Shi'i sympathies. This had two results. Firstly, the Shi'a adopted the tactic of concealment (taqiyya) which sometimes entailed permanent public profession of Sunnism to avoid persecution. This significantly blurred the line between the two groups and often makes it impossible to say whether a particular individual was Sunni or Shi'i. Secondly, the tragic history of the early Imami lineage - the assassination of 'Ali, the early suspicious death of Hasan and the martyrdom of Husayn - plus subsequent persecutions encouraged the elaboration of a theology of martyrdom. This found its popular elaboration in the passion plays (ta'ziya) to commemorate the martyrdom of Husayn celebrated in Iran since the 16th century.

### The Isma'ili Movement

By the death of Ja'far al-Sadiq in 765, the identity of the Shi'i line of imams had crystallised. In the next generation, however, a dispute over the identity of the imam led to the division of the Shi'a into their two main branches, the Isma'ilis or Seveners and the Imamis or Twelvers. During his lifetime, Ja'far had designated his son Isma'il as the next imam. Unfortunately, Isma'il predeceased him and when he died most Shi'a recognised his son, Musa, as imam, but a break-away group insisted that Isma'il was the designated seventh imam and that his son, Muhammad, should be the next imam. This group became known as the Isma'ilis or Sevens Shi'a and played an extremely important role in Islamic history. When Muhammad died his followers elaborated the doctrine of occultation (ghayba). This doctrine stated that the last imam had not died but gone into occultation, a kind of suspended animation beyond mortal perception, and would return at the end of time. In the meantime, he was represented on earth by individuals known as proofs (hujjas) of his existence.

The early history of the Isma'ilis is shrouded in mystery: very little is heard of them between the 760s and the late 9th century when they suddenly emerged as an underground revolutionary movement in Iraq, Syria and the Arabian peninsula. Soon after the hujja of the time, 'Ubayd Allah, announced that he was the returned imam-mahdi, destined to establish a new Islamic order. His announcement caused a split in the Isma'ili movement. Those who accepted 'Ubayd Allah as the mahdi became known as the Fatimids. They successfully converted the Kutama Berbers of Tunisia to Isma'ilism, established the Fatimid caliphate and then conquered Egypt where they ruled until 1171. Those who rejected 'Ubayd Allah's claim became known as the Qaramita. They were based in Bahrayn and Syria.

Isma'ili beliefs are the subject of considerable scholarly debate since few Isma'ili writings have survived and medieval accounts of their doctrine are generally written by their enemies. What does emerge is the influence of Greek philosophy, and in particular Neoplatonism, upon them. Between the 8th and 11th centuries they developed a sophisticated cosmology which gave the number seven special significance. The early Fatimid Isma'ilis believed that God existed alone emanating light and that creation proceeded from the light when ordered to do so by God. His first creation was the concept of existence or being (Kuni). To show Kuni that he is not god, God orders him to create another being to assist him. This is Qadar, a word meaning predestination or possibility. From these two first principles, the rest of creation proceeds. They create seven cherubim who later rule the seven heavens and twelve spirits who later control the signs of the zodiac. The predominant influence on early Isma'ili thought appears to have been

the gnostic tradition. In subsequent generations this was overlaid by Neoplatonism according to which Kuni and Qadar became 'intellect' and 'soul' from which other principles emanate.

Ultimate responsibility for defining Isma'ili doctrine lay with the Fatimid imams in Cairo who were, of course, considered the source of revelation in each generation. This meant that Isma'ili theologians routinely described themselves as 'narrators' and sought the imams permission to circulate their works. Many of these works were written to educate Isma'ili scholars in the House of Knowledge (dar al-hikma) in Cairo before sending them out across the Islamic world as propagandists for the Isma'ili cause. To improve co-ordination, the Fatimids often appointed a head missionary for each area. During the 10th century, the Isma'ilis were strongest in the western Islamic world despite inroads in Iran and Central Asia. In the 11th century they became a potent force in the eastern Islamic world as a result of the activities of Hasan-i Sabah, a Cairene-trained missionary who captured the fortress of Alamut in the Alburz mountains south of the Caspian Sea in 1090 as a base for activities in Iran. At about the same time the Fatimids split into two branches after a dispute over the succession to the caliphate, the Nizaris and the Musta'lis. The Cairene establishment was Musta'li while Hasan-i Sabah and the Syrian Isma'ilis led by Rashid al-Din Sinan became Nizari, thereby gaining independence from Cairo.

The Nizari Isma'ilis became known to Europeans during the Crusades as the Assassins because of the daring murders they committed to terrorise their Sunni opponents. The word 'assassin' is in fact a corruption of the slur 'hashshishiyin', hashish smokers, given to the Nizari Isma'ilis by their opponents. In Arab culture, this indicated riff-raff but the Crusaders took it literally and formulated fantastic tales about how Isma'ili assassins were plied with hashish and entertained by beautiful girls prior to going on their missions as a foretaste of paradise. It was also believed that Isma'ilis assassins took hashish to strengthen their nerve before committing murder. None of these legends were true. The Isma'ilis believed in the righteousness of their cause and saw the judicious execution of key Sunni figures such as the Saljuq minister, Nizam al-Mulk, as an effective way to combat the establishment. To a degree they were right: Isma'ili terror was certainly a destabilising force in 12th century Syria, Iraq and Iran but ultimately they were unable to overthrow the established order. On the other hand, the Saljuqs were unable to uproot the Isma'ilis from Alamut or their other fortresses in northwest Iran. It was left to the Mongols to conquer and destroy the Isma'ili principality in 1256. Meanwhile the Isma'ili Fatimid caliphate had also disappeared.

At this point the remnants of the Isma'ili movement disappeared underground but small communities of Qaramita, Musta'li and Nizari Isma'ilis continued to exist in various corners of the Islamic world. One important community resided in the Yemen and established a new community in India. This Indian community became known as the Bohras and their imam is the Agha Khan. In the twentieth century many Bohras migrated from India to Europe and the United States where they have become a wealthy and industrious Muslim community. From a historical point of view, the preservation of Isma'ili texts by the Bohras has been critically important. Although much has been lost, the libraries of the Bohras have enabled historians to assess the Isma'ili movement on its own terms rather than through the eyes of its enemies for the first time.

### Twelver Shi'ism

Twelver or Imami Shi'ism is the main branch of Shi'ism. After the death of Ja'far al-Sadiq, the majority of the Shi'a accepted Musa al-Kazim as the seventh imam. The Imami line continued with Musa's son, 'Ali al-Rida whom the 'Abbasid caliph, al-Ma'mun, named as his successor in order to resolve the conflict between the 'Abbasids and the 'Alids. 'Ali al-Rida died before he could inherit and was buried at Mashhad in northeast Iran. His followers considered his death suspicious and it reinforced the emerging theme of martyrdom within Imami Shi'ism. The next three imams - Muhammad al-Taqi, 'Ali al-Naqi and



Hasan al-'Askari - resided in Iraq, often under the surveillance of the 'Abbasids who constantly feared an uprising on their behalf, despite their generally quiescent attitude. These imams were all buried in Iraq. When Hasan al-'Askari died in 873 he left a four year old son, Muhammad, the twelfth imam. Muhammad disappeared soon afterwards. It is impossible to say what actually happened to Muhammad but the Shi'a believe that he went into hiding and was represented publicly by deputies (wakils). After a time he went into occultation (ghayba) where he remains alive awaiting his return to earth as the mahdi.

Unlike the Isma'ilis, whose imam returned, the Twelver Shi'a remained without legitimate religio-political leadership due to the absence of the Hidden Imam. This made Twelver Shi'ism an inward-looking rather than overtly oppositional movement. Nonetheless, the Twelvers did take advantage of the pro-Shi'i atmosphere created by the rise of the Qaramita and the Fatimids and the Buyid assumption of control over the 'Abbasids in the 10th century. Shi'i literature flourished as did new forms of Shi'i ceremonial such as the mourning ceremonies to commemorate the martyrdom of Husayn at Karbala. Although the Shi'a shared many ritual practices with the Sunni Muslim majority, their doctrine of the imamate meant that they not only credited the imams with the possession of esoteric knowledge transmitted from the Prophet Muhammad, but almost made Muhammad secondary to 'Ali. In Twelver Shi'i theology, the Prophet became in part the herald of the imamate of 'Ali.

For several centuries, the Twelver Shi'a remained a minority residing within Sunni Muslim society. They expressed their beliefs in a more or less open way depending upon the tolerance of the communities in which they resided. Larger numbers of Shi'a clustered in Bahrayn, Lebanon and southern Iraq where the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala are located. Their history took a new turn in the early sixteenth century when the new Safavid ruler of Azerbaijan and Iran, Shah Isma'il, proclaimed himself imam-mahdi and announced that henceforth the religion of his domains would be Twelver Shi'ism. As mentioned in the section on the Safavids, Shah Isma'il's decision was somewhat unexpected and highly unorthodox from the perspective of the Twelver Shi'a. Firstly, recognition of the imam-mahdi was the task of the Shi'i scholars ('ulama') who had no reason to suppose that Shah Isma'il was who he claimed to be. Secondly, in the absence of the Hidden Imam, all religio-political power was illegitimate including that of the Safavids.

On the other hand, many Twelver Shi'a realised that Shah Isma'il offered them an unprecedented opportunity to live in a Shi'i state without fear of persecution or need for dissimulation. During the reign of Shah Isma'il and his son, Shah Tahmasp, Shi'i scholars from all over the Islamic world migrated to Iran and formed the first Twelver Shi'i religious establishment in history. Conversely Sunni scholars either converted or emigrated to neighbouring lands. Shah Isma'il insisted that all his subjects adhere to Shi'ism and attempted to implement his decision by the sword. This meant that many conversions were, in the first instance, tactical: a desperate attempt to save life and property. Over time, however, Shi'ism took deeper root as later unsuccessful attempts to bring the country back to Sunnism demonstrate.

The process of becoming a state religion naturally affected Twelver Shi'ism greatly. Theory now had to be transformed into practice. During the Safavid period, the Shi'i establishment remained technically subservient to the shahs who claimed religio-political status as the descendants of Musa al-Kazim and the earthly representatives of the imams. As the Shi'i scholarly class became better established, however, the orthodox doctrine of the Hidden Imam reasserted itself and grumbles against the heretical pretensions of the Safavids were heard. The fact that many later Safavid shahs drank heavily and used drugs certainly did not help in this respect. After the fall of the Safavids in the early eighteenth century, the Twelver Shi'i scholars quickly appropriated the right to define doctrine in the absence of the Hidden Imam and placed subsequent Iranian regimes in the position of temporal guardians of the imam's patrimony. This gave Iranian dynasties such as the Qajars and Pahlavis some legitimacy without allowing them to assume religious authority over the by now extremely powerful Shi'i religious establishment.

As religious leaders of a Shi'i society, Shi'i scholars in Iran also had to tackle practical issues such as education, provision of legal opinions and judgements, and maintenance of public morality. The basis for Shi'i law remained the work of Ja'far al-Sadiq but new exigencies demanded new legal responses. In the eighteenth century Shi'i scholars took two opposing views on this issue. On the one hand stood the Akhbaris, who believed that scholars should rely on the existing Akhbar, the Shi'i version of the Hadith. On the other, stood the Usulis who believed that scholars should refer to the sources – the Qur'an, Sunna and the statements of the imams – but also use their independent critical faculties (ijtihad) to provide answers to legal questions posed to them. Those who exercised their judgement in this way were known as mujtahids. This debate largely took place in the shrine towns of Iraq, Najaf and Karbala, which were and are important centres of Shi'i scholarship but it had great effect in Iran where the Usuli position won the day. This gave the Iranian religious establishment the ability to constantly reassess Shi'i theology and law and adapt it to new circumstances. This made possible the radical changes in Shi'ism generated by Ayatollah Khomeini's doctrine that clerics had the right and responsibility to establish an Islamic state, despite the absence of the imam.

The conversion of the subject population of the Safavid empire to Shi'ism was a slow process which demanded the formation of a popular form of the faith comprehensible to everyone. In the sixteenth century when the Safavids established their state in Iran, the faith of the people was extremely heterogeneous. The inhabitants of the cities and larger village communities probably identified themselves as either Sunni or Shi'i but illiterate peasant and tribal communities probably made little distinction between the two. Qizilbash devotion to their Safavid Sufi religious leaders was one example of the tendency for rural communities to identify with local religious lineages rather than different orthodox textual variants of Islam. The brand of Islam promoted by these religious lineages was generally a blend of elements - Sunni, Shi'i and Sufi - which emphasised the relationship between a spiritual master, his disciples and his lay followers.

The Safavids outlawed the veneration of all such lineages except their own and tried to channel popular devotion to saintly figures into veneration of the dead Shi'i imams and their relatives. The Safavids accompanied the persecution of rival Sufi leaders with the construction of a new religious landscape. The shrines of non-Shi'i saints were re-interpreted as mashhads and imamzadas (see below), the burial places of important members of the lineage were rebuilt and embellished and the state promoted the celebration of new Shi'i ceremonies. Most important among these were the rites associated with Ashura, the tenth day of the first Muslim month, Muharram, which was said to be the day when the army of the Umayyad caliph, Yazid, killed the Prophet's grandson, Husayn, and his family at Karbala. Shah 'Abbas in particular sponsored the performance of elaborate passion plays and communal mourning ceremonies (taziya) to commemorate the martyrdom of Husayn. These ceremonies have become a key part of Shi'i ritual, distinguishing it from Sunnism. In Shah 'Abbas's time, they were accompanied by 'mock' fights in the maydan of Isfahan between different urban quarters which played an important part in releasing inter-communal tensions. In Shi'i communities today, Ashura processions often involve men who flagellate themselves in commemoration of the suffering of Husayn and his family. The degree of violence tends to reflect not simply piety but also the level of stress within the community. For instance, Ashura ceremonies in war-torn Lebanon have exhibited considerable violence.

### The Emergence of Sufism

Sufism is often wrongly identified as a sect within Islam, similar to Sunnism or Shi'ism. In reality, Sufism is a way of approaching or interpreting Islam best translated as Islamic mysticism. Sufis or mystics may be either Sunni or Shi'i but instead of focusing on the legal or ritual aspects of Islam, they concentrate on the spiritual dimension, the universal human urge to find God and commune with Him. From the time of the Prophet, this mystical urge existed within Islam. Muhammad himself was essentially a mystic in

communion with God but the construction of an ideal community and then an empire forced many early Muslims to concentrate on the esoteric aspects of the faith as mentioned above. Nonetheless, the interaction between Muslims and converts from other Near Eastern faiths in Syria and Mesopotamia introduced new mystical strands into the faith. Converts from Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism were heirs to rich mystical and contemplative traditions which were absorbed into the Islamic milieu.

The earliest recorded Muslim mystics came from the city of Basra in Iraq. They were generally pious Muslims who felt that performance of ritual prayer and obedience to the law needed to be supplemented by additional prayers, fasting and recitation of the Qur'an, all recorded practices of the Prophet. They were, in essence, ascetics whose practices were similar to those of Byzantine Christian hermits. One of the most famous of these early mystics was Rabi'a of Basra, a manumitted slave girl who decided to reject the proposals of marriage made to her and spend her life in poverty and ascetism, loving God. Other early ascetics were Hasan of Basra and Junayd of Baghdad who combined scholarly and ascetic pursuits and maintained that Muslims must perform Islam's exoteric rituals while also embarking upon personal spiritual quests. Ascetics of this type were the founders of what came to be known as the sober school of Sufism.

As Islam became more sophisticated from the ninth century onwards, Sufism evolved from ascetism into fully fledged mysticism with a complex theology of its own. The basic ambition of a Sufi was to return his or her own soul to the Divine source of all things, to experience what Sufis called *fana'*, the dissolution of the self in God. This required the receipt of gnosis, the hidden truth of Islam, known as the *batin*, which was the opposite of exoteric Islam, the *zahir*. The Qur'an was the ultimate source of both the *zahir* and the *batin*, which were naturally complementary, but only the spiritually enlightened could understand the hidden meaning. Spiritual enlightenment was, however, a gift. A Sufi adept could prepare him or herself by praying, meditating, and fasting but God would decide whether to bestow the gift of gnosis or withhold it.

A very different type of Sufism, known as intoxicated or ecstatic Sufism, emerged further east as a result of the conversion of Zoroastrians and the integration of Zoroastrian elements into Islam. Zoroastrians believed in incarnation, that is the possibility that God could possess a man and speak through him. In Zoroastrian ritual this occurred after the priest, the magus, drank of the sacred mead (*haoma*). Although not the same, the Zoroastrian idea of incarnation approximated the sober Sufi concept of *fana'*. The difference was that intoxicated Sufis such as al-Bistami, the son of a Zoroastrian priest, believed that their possession by God rendered them free of all constraints. They no longer had to respect the exoteric rituals of Islam because such rites were designed to remind the ordinary frail believer of God. Since God was immanent in their lives, they did not need them. The most notorious intoxicated Sufi was the Iranian, al-Hallaj, a hugely popular individual, always surrounded by large crowds, who stated whilst in a trance, 'I am the Truth'. The authorities in Baghdad considered this statement, highly reminiscent of the Christian statement, 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life', blasphemous. They asked al-Hallaj to recant several times then, finally, executed him for blasphemy in 922.

Early Sufism was highly individualistic and its practitioners generally highly educated in the exoteric religious sciences. Over time, the Sufi search for Truth became systematised and popularised. This process started when the disciples of eminent Sufis began to codify their teachings and formulate a Sufi 'way' based on their practices. These Sufi ways (*turuq*) consisted of special prayers and rituals designed to bring the disciple closer to God which Sufi masters would teach to their followers. By the 11th century, *khanqahs*, special institutions for the practice of Sufism were a common feature of Islamic cities. Institutionalisation encouraged further elaboration of the Sufi way which came to be seen as a series of stages (*maqam*) and states (*hal*) which an adept had to pass through on the way to union with God, *fana'*, and its concomitant, *baqa'*, a return to the world to live in a permanent state of grace.

As the Sufi ways became more systematised and complex, the idea of an independent search for God was replaced by the idea that a disciple needed a master to instruct him or her on the way. Only rare individuals could find God alone. Some Sufi ways gained adherents throughout the Islamic world and possessed khanqahs in several cities. One such way was the Qadiriyya, a Baghdad-based tariqa with adherents from Morocco to India. Others such as the North African Shadhiliyya and the Turco-Persian Mevleviye had regional followings. Some had an even smaller catchment area. By the 13th century, Sufi *turuq* were present not only in cities but also in the countryside where they played an important role in the Islamisation of the tribal fringe.

### Popular Sufism and Shi'ism and the Shrines of Iran

Sufism became extremely popular throughout the Islamic world because it added an emotional, human dimension to an otherwise quite dry and legalistic faith. Sufis themselves acted as important foci for popular piety, sometimes in spite of themselves. When they retreated to rural areas, they often played an important part in converting peasants and tribesmen to Islam. This does not mean that conversion was their intention, they were not missionaries, but their evident proximity to God and sometimes eccentric behaviour encouraged illiterate communities to view them as repositories of the faith and to look to them for spiritual succour. In particular, the conversion of both the Ghuzz Turks and the Mongols appears to have been the work of wandering Sufis, whose position seemed analogous to that of Central Asian shamans. Between the 12th and 15th centuries, rural Sufi shaykhs thus began to play a dual role. On the one hand, they continued to teach their respective Sufi ways to small inner circles of disciples. On the other, they built up large 'lay' followings of peasants and/or tribesmen who were not themselves Sufis but considered the local Sufi shaykh their spiritual leader. In many cases, such Sufi shaykhs established lineages who tended the shrine of their eponymous ancestor and played the role of local spiritual leaders through the generations.

A good example of this is the Safaviyya lineage of Ardabil which produced the Safavid dynasty of Iran. The founder of the lineage was a fourteenth century Sufi shaykh, Safi al-Din, who founded a retreat at Ardabil. He taught a small group of disciples within his khanqah but also became the focus for the piety of the Turcoman tribes of the surrounding area, most of whom belonged to the Ak Koyunlu confederation. When Shaykh Safi al-Din died he was buried in his khanqah which thereby became a shrine as well as the home of the Safaviyya. It soon developed into a complex of buildings which included the residence of the shaykh and his family, accommodation for disciples and pilgrims, meeting rooms, a mosque and the mausoleum of Shaykh Safi al-Din. Pilgrims came to the shrine to pay their respects at the tomb of Safi al-Din and seek his intercession with God when they had difficulties. Some came to participate in the rituals of the Safaviyya and study with the living shaykh. As a result the shrine complex became a bustling centre of activity, both religious and economic, since pilgrims' needs had to be supplied.

These comments about the Safaviyya shrine and its workings apply equally to other major Sufi shrines in Iran and Central Asia. In Iran, these are, however, limited in number due to the Safavids' efforts to extirpate popular Sufism and channel popular piety into Shi'i channels. As a result most of Iran's major shrines are Shi'i centres where the imams and their close relatives are either buried or commemorated. Most of these shrines only became important with the rise of the Safavids. In the case of smaller shrines many were actually minor Sufi shrines which were 'converted'. A common word for a major Shi'i shrine is *mashhad*, meaning place of witness or martyrdom, a reference to the Twelver Shi'i belief that the imams were martyred by the Sunnis. Shrines are also known as *imamzadas*, a term meaning 'sons of imams', i.e. the burial place of someone of Imami lineage. It is likely that many small *mashhads* and *imamzadas* were actually the burial places of Sufis who gradually came to be identified as relatives of the imams and therefore Shi'i 'saints'. Shrines of this type are regularly visited by local people, often women, who appeal

to the 'saint' for help with the trials and tribulations of their daily life.

The most important mashhad in Iran is that of 'Ali al-Rida, the eighth imam, located in the city of the same name, Mashhad, in Khurasan. This shrine gained enormously in importance during the early seventeenth century as a result of the actions of the Safavid Shah 'Abbas, who was to a degree responsible for the popularisation of Iranian Shi'ism. Shah 'Abbas invested heavily in the shrine which was rebuilt and embellished, and in the road network leading to it. He then promoted it as a pilgrim centre of equal importance to the previously more popular Shi'i shrines in Iraq which were under Ottoman control. Finally, he himself performed a celebrated pilgrimage to Mashhad on foot, a journey celebrated as a feat of piety by his chronicler. The other major Shi'i shrine in Iran is the tomb of 'Ali al-Rida's sister, Fatima, located at Qumm. This shrine was also expanded and embellished during the Safavid period.

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