TWELVER SHI'ITE ISLAM: CONCEPTUAL AND PRACTICAL ASPECTS

M. Ismail Marcinkowski*

Introduction

R ecent political events surrounding the Iranian "nuclear crisis", as well as the still unsettled fate of Iraq have resulted in a renewed interest in the Shi'ite dimension of Islam among political observers. The events in mainly Shi'ite Iraq and Iran should also be of concern to policy-makers in Southeast Asia, and this is not only because of the possibility of the almost certain occurrence of "solidarity effects" among Muslims of the region in general should America go to war against Iran.

According to *The World Factbook*,[1] published annually by the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States, Islam was the second largest religion in 2005. About 15% of the world's Muslims of perhaps up to 1.5 billion are Shi'ites, the majority of them Twelvers. Twelver Shi'ites today constitute the majority in Iran (c. 90%), the Republic of Azerbaijan (c. 75%), Iraq (c. 60-65%), and also in Bahrain (more than 60%), which, nevertheless, has a Sunni Head of State. In Lebanon, the Twelvers constitute more than 40%, the largest single religious group in the country. There are also large minorities in Qatar (c. 20%), Afghanistan (about 19%), Pakistan (about 20% of the total population, especially around Lahore),

* Dr Marcinkowski is a Visiting Research Scholar with the Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies (IDSS) at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore, as well as Visiting Affiliate at National University of Singapore (NTU). He is the author of Religion and Politics in Iraq. Shi'ite Clerics between Quietism and Resistance (Singapore, 2004). His eighth and latest book, Shi'ite Islam in Southeast Asia. Basic Concepts, Cultural and Historical Aspects, Contemporary Implications, of which this article constitutes the first chapter, is forthcoming at Singapore University Press. This paper is also available online as IDSS Working Paper No. 113 at http://www.idss.edu.sg.

1. Available online at http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/

1

Tajikistan (c. 5%), India (especially in Oudh (Lucknow), and in the Deccan (Hyderabad). They are also to be found in large numbers in Kashmir (in both parts of the Indian and Pakistani-occupied areas) and in the eastern oil-producing Persian Gulf regions of Saudi Arabia, where they are the majority (11% of the kingdom's total population).[2]

Since I can foresee that this article will arouse criticism from certain strata in particular from the religious establishment, it should be emphasized right at the beginning that this paper is not intended to either "promote" or "deny" anything. Within this setting, the recent phenomenon of a Shi'ite revival and "conversion" from Sunnism to Shi'ism among Southeast Asian Muslims appears to warrant particular attention.[3] Solid knowledge of the basic concepts of Shi'ism (as distinct from Sunnism), as well as of the multi-facetted nature of the Islamic civilization as manifested in Southeast Asia, is indispensable in order to arrive at a fact-oriented, less sensational and sober evaluation of current events.

From "Supporters" to "Shi'ites": The Emergence of the Term *Shi'ah*

In Arabic, the word *shi'ah* conveys the meaning of "party", "partisans", "group", or "supporters" and the like.[4] To the knowledge and understanding of the present writer, it appears only in this rather *neutral* sense in the Qur'an (such as in 28:15 and 37:83), since "Shi'ism" (as we know it today) is a later historical development. A translation of *shi'ah* as "sect" is, to my mind, still possible, however, without interpreting "into it" the meaning of "Shi'ite". The following four passages may suffice:[5]

---

2. For a very recent scholarly treatment of the Shi'ites of the Arabian Peninsula see W. Ende, "Shi'ites in Arabia," Encyclopaedia Iranica (New York, forthcoming in print, also available online at http://www.iranica.com/articles/ot_grp5/ot_shiites_arabia_20040616.html, accessed on March 28, 2006).

3. I have tried to address this issue in my book Shi'ite Islam in Southeast Asia. Basic Concepts, Cultural and Historical Aspects, Contemporary Implications (forthcoming at Singapore University Press).

4. The adjective (qualifying masculine nouns) is *shi'i*.

5. Qur'anic citations are from the English translation by 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali, an updated version of which has been published recently by the Islamic Book Trust Kuala Lumpur: see 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali, trans., *The Holy Qur'an. Text and Translation* (Kuala Lumpur, 2005).

As for those who divide their religion and break up into sects (*shiya'an*), you have no part in them in the least: their affair is with Allah: He will in the end tell them the truth of all that they did (6:159);

Say: "He has power to send calamities on you, from above and below, or to cover you with confusion in party strife (*shiya'an*), giving you a taste of mutual vengeance - each from the other. See how We explain the Signs by various (symbols); that they may understand (6:65);

Turn you back in repentance to Him, and fear Him: establish regular prayers, and be not you among those who join gods with Allah. Those who split up their Religion, and become (mere) sects (*shiya'an*), each party (*hizbi*) rejoicing in that which is with itself! (30:31-32);

Truly Pharaoh elated himself in the land and broke up its people into sections (*shiya'an*), depressing a small group among them: their sons he slew, but he kept alive their females: for he was indeed a maker of mischief (28:4).

At any rate, in early Islamic history, that is to say, during the period immediately following the death of Muhammad in 632 C.E., the term *shi'ah* appears to have been used in this very sense, i.e. "partisans", "followers".

The Muslim community (*ummah*) differed after Muhammad's death on who should lead them in future. Revelation had ceased and some parts of the community were of the view that Muhammad *did not* appoint someone who should succeed him as political leader, but had left it rather to the *ummah* as a whole to decide. This faction could be referred to as "proto-Sunnites". Another faction held the view that Muhammad *did* in fact appoint a successor, in this case from his own family, namely his cousin and son-in-law 'Ali b. Abi Talib, a highly-revered warrior and husband of his only surviving daughter, Fatimah. It was this group, which became later known as "the Shi'ites" par excellence. In historical reality, however, Muhammad was succeeded as a political leader by three of his associates

or "Companions" (*sahabah*) who assumed the humble title of "caliph", i.e. "successor" (*khalifah*). All of them came to power under rather dubious circumstances that have been made the focus of attention by Shi'ite authors throughout Islamic history. The politicking and struggles for leadership immediately following the death of Muhammad have been analyzed most comprehensively in an authoritative study by Wilferd Madelung[6] of recent date and shall thus not be repeated here.

In 656, the year of the murder of 'Uthman, the last of the three caliphs that had ruled one after the other, 'Ali was finally elected caliph by a part of the community. Another faction favoured Mu'awiyah, a relative of 'Uthman. The partisans of 'Ali were by then known as *Shi'at 'Ali*, "the party of 'Ali", and those who favoured Mu'awiyah as *Shi'at Mu'awiyah*. Mu'awiyah was to become the founder of the first dynasty in Islam, the Umayyads (r. 661 to 750 C.E.), who were despised not only by the Shi'ites but also by a larger sections of rest of the Muslim community for the supposed "godless" character of their rule. It was, however, already during Mu'awiyah's lifetime that his supporters styled themselves as *ahl al-sunnah wa'l-jama'ah*, "People of the customs [of Muhammad] and of the community",[7] by "appropriating" the right to speak on behalf of the entire ummah and stamping the Shi'at 'Ali as heretics. Today, the term *ahl al-sunnah wa'l-jama'ah*, somewhat out of fashion today in other parts of the Sunni world, but is still often applied in daily discourse by Sunni Malays in Malaysia when referring to themselves. Both terms, "Sunni" as well as "Shi'ite", are thus highly politicized terms and rather empty shells that tell us nothing about the actual beliefs held by their respective followers.

In Shi'ite as well as Sunni sources, those members of Muhammad's family that were considered closest and most dear to him – his daughter Fatimah, 'Ali, and their two sons al-Hasan and al-Husayn - were respect-fully referred to as "People of the House" (*Ahl al-Bayt*) or "Family of Muhammad" (*Âl-i Muhammad*), a term which would later also include

---

6.   W. Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad: A Study of the Early Caliphate* (Cambridge, 1998).

7.   The term "Sunni" is derived there from.

their desecendents. Until today, descent from the *Ahl al-Bayt* is considered prestigious, and generations of Muslims, both Shi'ite as well as Sunni, have spent their energy on meticulous research that has led to the preparation of genealogical trees (*shajarah*), not all of them necessarily being beyond doubt with regard to their veracity. Throughout the Muslim world, those who claim descent from the Prophet through the *Ahl al-Bayt*, use to prefix the term *sayyid*, "lord", to their given name if they are men, and *sayyidah*, "lady", if they are women. In Southeast Asia, the term *sharifah* instead of *sayyidah* is more common.

The differences between the *Shi'at 'Ali* and the supporters of the Umayyads signified not only a political conflict, but were also of consequence with regard to the issue of how to apply and interpret what was to develop later on into the *shari'ah* or Islamic law. It is important to keep in mind that these essentialls political differences between the *Ahl al-Bayt* and their supporters (i.e. the early Shi'ites) on the one hand, and those who rejected their claims on the other, have also shaped the respective Shi'ite and Sunni views on some key issues pertaining to the Qur'an, the "Traditions" (Arab. *hadith* [in Arabic a singular, in English often also used as plural], reports recording the practice of the Prophet Muhammad, his sunnah), on the role of personalities in the interpretation of major events in Islamic history,[8] as well as on weltanschauung in general. For instance, throughout history, Shi'ites have been accused (to my mind erroneously, as I have tried to show elsewhere[9]) by their opponents of manipulating the corpus of the qur'anic text in order to "make their point". Subsequently, both "denominations", Shi'ites and Sunni, developed their own corpus of *hadith* and legal literature.[10] The *Hadith* accepted by the Shi'ites in their chains of narrators (*isnad*) usually comprise a high proportion of people from or close to the *Ahl al-Bayt*, whereas those accepted by the Sunni's are

---

8.   C. Marcinkowski, "Challenges and Perspectives for the Perception and Teaching of Islamic History," *Islamic Culture* 76, No. 3 (2002), pp. 63-82.

9.   See on this discussion C. Marcinkowski, "Some Reflections on Alleged Twelver Shi'ite Attitudes Towards the Integrity of the Qur'an," *The Muslim World* 91, No. 1-2 (Spring 2001), pp. 137-53.

10. For a good overview of Shi'ite legal literature see Hossein Modarressi-Tabataba'i, *An Introduction to Shi'i Law. A Bibliographical Study* (London, 1984).

mostly based on the "Companions" (*sahabah*) and those who based their reports on them. Moreover, with regard to what was to become Twelver Shi'ism later on, it has to be emphasised that the very term *hadith* also includes reports from the twelve Imams and Fatimah.

Authority in Islam – the Shi'ite Way

Shi'ite Muslims in general, regardless of which particular sect, are of the view that Muhammad's family (i.e. *Ahl al-Bayt* and the Imams from their progeny) were the most authentic source of knowledge about the Qur'an, the best-qualified teachers of Islam after the Prophet, and the most trusted carriers and protectors of Muhammad's *sunnah*, due to many emphasized sayings ascribed to him. They also believe that by Muhammad's direct order, 'Ali was appointed successor on many occasions, that he was the rightful leader of the Muslims after Muhammad's passing, and that to follow Muhammad's true *sunnah* one must support 'Ali's succession. Moreover, in the particular view of the Twelvers, the appointment to the Imamate does not happen as an act of arbitrary selection, let's say because of one's capabilities as a political leader or qualities as a warrior. Appointment is rather a true "act of God," that is to say, through "divine designation" (*nass*), thus acting through the Prophet (in the case of 'Ali) or through the Imams (when appointing a successor).

To sum up, the main differences between Shi'ites and Sunni's until the early Umayyad period, which could also be considered the formative period of political Shi'ism,[11] focused on the question of leadership, i.e. "the Imamate" (*imamah*). As a result of this, Shi'ism split into numerous sub-divisions, most of them somewhat united in their reverence of 'Ali as the head of their movement in history, but often differing on the particular approach to be followed *vis-à-vis* the Umayyads and subsequent Sunni dynasties, which had been viewed as usurpers. Some of those groups, which ought to be referred to as religious "sects", ascribed to 'Ali and their leaders rather supernatural quasi-divine qualities. They

---

11. The formative period of Shi'ism has been investigated in an excellent study by S. H. M. Jafri, *Origins and Early Development of Shi'a Islam* (London, New York, and Beirut, 1979).

also differed often with regard to the particular line of genealogical descent from 'Ali. Most significantly, however, Shi'ites in general (with the exception of the Zaydi's, who are to be encountered today almost exclusively in Yemen) tend to reject the claim of the Sunni to speak on behalf of the Prophet and Islam, and thus *de facto* the legitimacy of the entire Sunni religious establishment. In should be mentioned here only in passing that this circumstance is also of some consequence in terms of the fate of contemporary Southeast Asian Shi'ism in a country as thoroughly dominated by Sunnism as Malaysia.

Throughout the pertinent Islamic literature - Shi'ite as well as Sunni - the leader of the Islamic *ummah* is mostly referred to as Imam. More commonly, this term is used when referring to the head of a particular branch of Shi'ism. Twelver Shi'ism, with which we are primarily concerned here, was by then only *one* of those many branches. In early Islamic heresiographical literature they are referred to as *al-Imamiyyah*, "Imamites". The "Imamites" or "proto-Twelvers" could well be described as "sober Shi'ites" as they do not assign to their Imams any quasi-divine qualities, contrary to several other branches of Shi'ism which were in this regard often branded throughout medieval Islamic literature as "extremists" (*ghulat*). As we shall see later, Shi'ites in particular put special emphasis on political as well as spiritual leadership of the Muslims when referring to the Imamate. Each branch developed a corpus of literature defending their particular sect's claim to leadership. With regard to the Twelvers, perhaps the most famous work on this topic, written by a leading 11th-century authority, is Mufid's[12] *Book of Guidance*, which is also very popular among Sunni "converts" to Shi'ism in Southeast Asia.

It is worth mentioning here in passing that *Ansariyan Publications* in Ghom, Iran, which has republished the English translation of Mufid's work,[13] is perhaps one of the most popular distributors of Shi'ite literature

---

12.   See on him C. Marcinkowski, "Selected Aspects of the Life of and Work of al-Shaykh al-Mufid," *Hamdard Islamicus* 23, no. 2 (April-June 2000), pp. 41-54.

13.   Muhammad b. Muhammad b. Nu'man al-Shaykh al-Mufid (tr. I. K. A. Howard), *Kitab al-Irshad. The Book of Guidance* (Dubai, n.d., repr.).

in a variety of languages. Their website is also of interest in order to get an idea of the literature converts to Shi'ism are mainly drawing upon.[14] *Yayasan Fatimah* (the "Fatimah Foundation") in Jakarta, Indonesia, appears to be one of the main distributors of Shi'ite literature in Southeast Asia.[15]

Quietism vs. Activism? The Twelve Imams

The issue of the "legitimate" line of the Imamate and the question of how to respond appropriately (resistance or quietism?) to Umayyad, and subsequently Abbasid rule, perceived by Shi'ites as oppression, contributed further to the "branching out" of the Shi'ite movement. Here, we shall concentrate on the Imamites, the "proto-Twelvers". The Isma'ilis shall be referred to in brief where deemed necessary in order to make out their often contrasting views.

Contrary to what is generally known about and thought of Shi'ism – even by many Twelver Shi'ites themselves – the actual course of Islamic history seems to teach that the lives of almost all of the Imams were characterized more by quietism, intellectual enquiry, and scholarship rather than by rebellious attitudes towards their political surroundings. It is essential to elaborate this remarkable point a bit further: Although it is true that 'Ali's entire career as leader of the Muslims was filled with several military conflicts and fights against rebels (among them the notorious Mu'awiyah, as governor of Syria, his most formidable foe), we, nevertheless, do encounter two facets in one of the same person with different decisions made under different circumstances. During the caliphates of his three predecessors, for instance, 'Ali's attitude could well be seen as quasi-quietist, as he did not attempt to assume power by force. In 661 C.E., after 'Ali's murder during prayer, his son al-Hasan, the second Imam of the Twelvers, at first continued the war against Mu'awiyah.

---

14. Available online at http://www.ansariyan.org/ansariyan/pages/home_e/q_a.php (accessed on March 17, 2006).

15. A list of the publications distributed in Southeast Asia by Yayasan Fatimah can be viewed at http://www.fatimah.org/pustaka/inggris_penerbit_a.htm (accessed on March 17, 2006).

However, after many of his troops had deserted him, he decided to step down in order to avoid further bloodshed. In 669, al-Hasan too was murdered. His younger brother al-Husayn became the third Imam. It was only in 680, after the inhabitants of Kufah in Iraq had sent an urgent request for help against their brutal governor, that al-Husayn decided to refuse to give his oath of allegiance to the Umayyad regime. When he finally embarked on his fatal trip to Kufah, he went with the little band of his closest followers and members of his family, not with a large army, although it would not have been difficult for him to muster a large number of troops. The ensuing massacre of al-Husayn and his relatives and friends at the plains of Karbala' by largely superior Umayyad forces continues to traumatize the Islamic ummah until today. Husayn's particularly brutal slaughter added a dramatic note to the religious idea of "suffering on God's way". In Shi'ism, the killing of the Prophet's grandson by fellow Muslims is remembered annually with the performance of *Ta'ziyyah*, an issue that shall be addressed again shortly.

Al-Husayn's only surviving child 'Ali, known as *Zayn al-'Âbidin*, "Ornament of (God's) Servants", had been an eye-witness to the drama of Karbala'. He is considered the fourth Imam by the Twelvers and spent his time mostly in Medina, dedicating himself entirely to prayer and scholarship. His son Muhammad al-Baqir, the fifth Imam, also steered clear of the dangerous cliffs of daily politics. It is important to note that al-Baqir, an eminent scholar and transmitter of Traditions in his own right and as such respected by Shi'ites and Sunni's alike, was a contemporary of the formative period of Islamic legal scholarship during the first half of the 8th century C.E.

Most remarkably, however, his son Ja'far al-Sadiq, the sixth Imam of the Twelvers, was significantly involved in the training of Muslim legal scholars, among them Abu Hanifah, the founder of the Sunni Hanafi "school", which today is predominant in Turkey, the Balkans, and Central Asia. As a matter of fact, Ja'far's own legal system became known as the *ja'fari madhab*, or "the fifth legal school of Islam", named after him. Ja'far's significance as a scholar was such that the Twelvers until today, are also known as *Ja'faris* when referring to legal matters. It is important to note that - even though being a scholar and personality of this caliber and

standing - Ja'far deliberately kept strict neutrality during the civil war that led to the overthrow of the Umayyads and the takeover by the Abbasids around 750 C.E. His son Musa al-Kazim, the seventh Imam, also followed a similar line. During the first half of the 9th century C.E., the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun tried unsuccessfully to win Musa's son 'Ali al-Rida, the eighth Imam of the Twelvers, to cooperate with the regime. Al-Rida, who was considered the head of the descendents of the Prophet's family, refused and had to pay with his life. Indeed, all Imams, with the exception of the last, are said to have suffered a violent death. The ninth, tenth, and eleventh Imams spent their lives either under close supervision at the Abbasid court, in voluntary seclusion, or in prison, respectively.

The Hidden Imam

The case of the twelfth and last Imam is somewhat different from what has been discussed so far, as it is connected with the belief in the *Mahdi* ("The Rightly Guided One"), a kind of eschatological saviour, a belief that is shared by Sunni's and Shi'ites alike.[16] Similar to the "Second Coming" of Christ, the Mahdi, is supposed to "return" just before the "end of the world" and the "day of judgment". Sunni's also, believe in the coming of a Mahdi, but they differ on his identity. They either believe that he is yet to be born, or that he was born recently and has yet to emerge. Both, Sunni's as well as Shi'ites, do however agree, that this person will bring absolute peace and justice throughout the world by establishing Islam as the global religion. In Twelver understanding,[17] the eleventh Imam, al-Hasan al-'Askari, had fathered a son during his incarceration in the Iraqi town of Samarra', who was given the same name as the Prophet - Muhammad. According to Twelver Shi'ite tradition, the baby was somehow smuggled out of the prison and became the twelfth Imam after the death of his father. This twelfth Imam is considered by the Twelvers to be the Mahdi.

---

16. See W. Madelung, "al-Mahdi," in: *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., vol. 5, pp. 1230-38.

17. For good introductions to the social and theological background see Mohammed Ali Amir-Moezzi, *Le guide divin dans le Shi'sme originel aux sources de l' ésotérisme en Islam* (Paris, 1992), Jassim M. Hossain, *The Occulation of the Twelfth Imam. A Historical Background* (London, 1982), and Hossein Modarressi-Tabataba'i, *Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shiite Islam* (Princeton NJ,, 1993).

He is believed to have been hidden by God from his enemies by entering into subsequent kinds of "occultation" or "concealment" (*ghaybah*).[18] The first of them is referred to as "minor occultation" during which he is said to have communicated with the faithful only through his representatives who alone knew about his whereabouts.[19] After several years, he is believed to have entered into a "major occultation" that is supposed to have taken place in either 939 or 941 C.E. (depending on the sources). During this "major occultation", which is believed to continue until this very day, he is not accessible to anyone.[20] The main contention against this made by Sunni's is that it would be against the laws of nature for him to still be alive – after more than 1,000 years in concealment. Shi'ites use to counter by stating that some of the prophets mentioned in the Qur'an, - such as Jesus and Elias -, are also considered to still be alive by all Muslims.[21]

We are not concerned here with the question of the veracity of these beliefs. What can be said with some degree of certainty, however, is that the lives of the Imams seem to give evidence to a rather quietist political attitude from their part. Moreover, also relevant in the context of the further development of Twelver Shi'ite Islam is that the inaccessibility of the Twelfth Imam (due to his "major occultation") resulted in a question – a "crisis" according to some scholars - of religious/legal and political

---

18. See Said Amir Arjomand, "Crisis of the Imamate and the Institution of Occultation in Twelver Shi'ism: A Sociohistorical Perspective," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28, no. 4, (1996), pp. 491-515, idem, "The Consolation of Theology. The Shi'ite Doctrine of Occultation and the Transition from Chiliasm to Law," *Journal of Religion* 76, no. 4 (1996), pp. 548-71, and idem, "Imam *Absconditus* and the Beginnings of a Theology of Occultation: Imami Shi'ism around 900 CE/280-290 AH," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 117, no. 1 (1997), pp. 1-13,

19. V. Klemm, V., "Die vier *sufara'* des Zwölften Imam. Zur formativen Periode der Zwölfersi'a," *Die Welt des Orients* 15 (1984), pp. 126-43.

20. For an early Twelver Shi'ite source see Abdulaziz Sachedina, "A Treatise on the Occultation of the Twelfth Imamite Imam," *Studia Islamica* 48 (1978), pp. 108-24.

21. Already in 944, C.E., only 3 years after the beginning of the "major occultation", a tomb with a mosque (later known as "Al-'Askariyyah") was erected on the burial site of the eleventh Imam. In the further course of history, a magnificent golden dome was constructed above the tomb which was destroyed by Sunni extremists in February 2006. This event has led to the outbreak of widespread sectarian violence throughout Iraq.

authority. The Imam was considered by the Twelvers the sole and supreme *legitimate* source for the interpretation of Islamic law and head of the Islamic ummah as a whole. Now that he was "gone" (whether forever or with an option to "return" shall not concern us here), who was to provide guidance to the Twelver Shi'ite community? In fact, this question was already somewhat present in the past during the presence of any of the previous Imams, as geographical distance as well as political oppression had often hindered them from maintaining constant contact with the faithful. Respected and learned local Shi'ites might have filled in the gap, perhaps even being authorized by the Imams, and we have just seen that the Twelfth Imam himself had entrusted some of them with communicating on his behalf with the community. However, the *de facto* complete absence of the Imam and the numerical increase of the community even in distant parts of the Islamic lands demanded some theoretical as well as practical answer to the question of "legitimate authority" in Twelver Shi'ism. It should be noted that this issue has in the past also attracted the attention of Western scholars, an interest that has increased since then due to the 1979 revolution in Iran,[22] and may again be brought to the fore within the context of the unsettled future of Iraq and what is referred to in the media as the "Iranian nuclear crisis".

It is not intended here to go into detail with regard to if and how the question of authority was answered by Twelver Shi'ites in the course of history.[23] Political activism and open resistance, more "popular" during those days among a wider strata of the Shi'ites and also favoured by other Shi'ite groups, had most often led to disaster, massacre, persecution, and, ultimately, failure. As a matter of fact, and in light of the just outlined actual course of the biographies of the Imams, "original" Twelver Shi'ism

---

22. See, for instance, J. Eliash, "The Ithna'ashari-Shi'i Juristic Theory of Political and Legal Authority," *Studia Islamica* 29 (1969), pp. 17-30, E. Kohlberg, "From Imamiyya to Ithna'-'ashariyya," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 39 (1976), pp. 521-34, N. Calder, "Judicial Authority in Imami Shi'i Jurisprudence," *Bulletin of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies* 6, no. 2 (1979), pp. 104-08, and W. Madelung, "Authority in Twelver Shiism in the Absence of the Imam," in: *La notion d'authorité au Moyen Age: Islam, Byzance, Occident. Colloques internationaux de la Napoule 1978* (Paris, 1982), pp. 163-73.

23. For a good overview on the developments in the Iranian context see Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order, and Societal Change in Shi'Ite Iran from the Beginning to 1890* (Chicago, 1987), and idem, ed., *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism* (Albany NY, 1988).

tends to be rather quietist. This quietism is not only in line with the history of the Twelvers as - compared with other Shi'ites – a politically insignificant minority through most of the Middle Ages and early modern times, but also with the practising of *taqiyyah*, usually translated as "dissimulation". We shall soon return to the issue of *taqiyyah*.

Another means of responding to political and religious persecution that shall only be mentioned here in passing - although somehow relevant in the Southeast Asian context - is emigration. A particularly "popular" destination in this regard was the mountainous far-away region of Yemen in southern Arabia, especially in Hadhramaut. In 930 C.E., Ahmad b. 'Isa b. 'Ali b. Ja'far - apparently a Shi'ite -, a respected descendant of the Prophet and great-grandson of the sixth Imam, emigrated to Yemen together with one of his sons and two descendants of the seventh Imam Musa al-Kazim. He became known as Ahmad "al-Muhajir" ("the emigrant") and is considered the ancestor of the Ba 'Alawi *sayyids* of Hadhramaut.[24] In the course of history, many of those *sayyids* "converted" to Sunnism, following the Shafi'ite "school" of Islamic law, and migrated as merchants to India and Southeast Asia. They are traditionally accredited with furthering the spread of Islam in the eastern archipelago through Sufism based on the thought of the celebrated medieval Sunni intellectual and mystical thinker Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111 C.E.).[25]

Taking the Shortcut: The Isma'ili *da'wah*

As Twelver Shi'ism was abstaining from political activism, those Shi'ites who were in search of somewhat quicker solutions to their plight, turned

---

24. Syed Farid Alatas, "The 'Alawiyyah *Tariqah*: A Preliminary Outline," in: Usuki Akira, Omar Farouk Bajunid and Yamagishi Tomoko, eds., *Population Movement beyond the Middle East: Migration, Diaspora, and Network* (Osaka, 2005), pp. 232-33.

25. Idem, "Hadhramaut and the Hadhrami Diaspora: Problems in Theoretical History," in: U. Freitag and W.G. Clarence-Smith, eds., *Hadhrami Traders, Scholars, and Statesmen in the Indian Ocean, 1750s-1960s* (Leiden, 1997), pp. 19-34. For some traditional views of the spread of Islam on Java and the role of Hadhrami *sayyids* therein see D. A Rinkes, *Nine Saints of Java*, tr. H. M. Froger, ed. A. Gordon, intro. G. W. J. Drewes (Kuala Lumpur, 1996, repr.). For a comprehensive treatment of the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia see A. Gordon, ed., *The Propagation of Islam in the Indonesian-Malay Archipelago* (Kuala Lumpur, 2001).

to other, more "attractive", branches of the Shi'ite movement, among them the Zaydis and the Isma'ilis.[26] In particular the Fatimids, the main branch of the Isma'ili movement, appealed to the Shi'ite masses as they were able to establish a powerful state of their own in the Sunni heartlands. Moreover, in contrast to the Twelvers, *their* Imam was not "hidden" but very much "present" in the person of the Fatimid Caliph-Imam, who demanded that his followers actively promote the "rights of the Prophet's family". From their capital Cairo (*al-Qahirah*, "the Victorious"), which was actually founded by them, the Fatimids controlled Egypt from the 10th century onwards, and at times, Syria, Hijaz, Yemen, and large parts of Northern Africa. Cairo's Al-Azhar university, was also a creation of the Shi'ite Fatimids. The Fatimids became the most formidable foe of Sunni Islam and of the political powers based on it, such as the Abbasid caliphate and the powerful Turkish Seljuk sultanate. In medieval Sunni heresio-graphical literature, Isma'ilis are usually referred to as *Batiniyyah*, i.e. those who rely on an esoteric (*batini*) interpretation of the Qur'an *vis-à-vis* the exoteric (*zahiri*) quasi-literal approaches of Sunni "state" religion. Isma'ili Shi'ism, especially of the Fatimid period, which lasted in Egypt until 1171 C.E., is accredited with important and innovative contributions in philosophy and science that have been branded by Sunni's as being in contrast with "revealed religion". Today, the London-based *Institute of Ismaili Studies* tries to revive the inquisitive spirit of medieval Isma'ilism by commissioning scholarly editions and English translations of the works by major Isma'ili scholars of the past.[27] Several leading Western scholars of Islam are currently assisting in this task. To the mind of the present writer, the medieval Isma'ili scholarly tradition constitutes a very interest-ing approach of combining - within the framework of the Islamic tradition - faith with reason, the lack of the latter is today usually lamented - even by many Muslims themselves.

Aside from their significance in the fields of Islamic philosophy and science, the activities of the Isma'ilis are also of importance in the context

---

26.   For the to date most comprehensive treatment of the Isma'ili political and spiritual movement see Farhad Daftary, *The Isma'ilis : Their History and Doctrines* (New York, 1992).

27.   Online information available at http://www.iis.ac.uk/home.asp?l=en (accessed on March 20, 2006).

of the spread of Shi'ism. This spreading of "the message" was known in Arabic as *da'wah* (literally "invitation [to Islam]"), originally a term also known to other Muslims, but usually associated in particular with the Isma'ili movement. From their power base in Cairo, the Fatimids sent their propagandists, known as *da'is*, in particular to the Sunni dominated areas of the Muslim world.

Some *da'is*, however, were also active in converting non-Muslims in India to Islam.[28] The Isma'ili *da'wah* in the Sunni heartlands, in particular in Iraq and Iran, had been persecuted severely, and subsequently many Isma'ilis emigrated to India, in particular to Multan and Sindh, where there were able to establish states of their own after having converted the local rulers. These *da'wah* activities often went along with trade. Muslim merchants could reach Southeast Asia only through leading sea routes via the Indian emporia. Although it has not yet been proven, it is highly probable that Isma'ili missionaries may also have reached the Malay-Indonesian archipelago by that time, i.e. the 11th and 12th centuries. Under the Mongol onslaught of the 13th century, Isma'ilism in general began to decline and lost much of its vigor. Being now basically a "spiritual movement", Isma'ilism blended with Sufism (*tasawwuf*, i.e. Islamic mysticism). Here, we have referred to the Isma'ilis mainly because of the significance of their intellectual and spiritual contribution (*vis-à-vis* Sunni legalism) and the political activism that went along with it.

Interpreting the Will of the Imam: Aspects of Twelver Shi'ism in the Period of the "Major Occultation"

Twelver Shi'ite Islam took a different course. Due to the "absence" of the Twelfth Imam, the most learned members of the Shi'ite community were often seen by the faithful as his rightful representatives. This complex development cannot be addressed here in full,[29] although it is highly

---

28. Farhad Daftary, "The Ismaili *da'wa* Outside the Fatimid *dawla*," in: M. Barrucand, ed., *L'Egypte fatimide: Son art et son histoire*, Paris, 2000, pp. 29-43.

29. See for this development Ahmad Kazemi-Moussavi, *Religious Authority in Shi'ite Islam. From the Office of Mufti to the Institution of Marja'* (Kuala Lumpur, 1996).

significant, as particular rights and duties, such as those pertaining to *Khums* ("the Fifth"), Friday prayers' sermon (*khutbah*) (or the appointment of deputies in this regard), and the declaration of *jihad*, were considered the sole prerogative of the Twelfth Imam. At first glance, this emergence of a "learned class" of ulama is somewhat reminiscent to the developments in SunniIslam. However, in the case of the Shi'ites, this "learned class" had no access yet to public and official functions as no Twelver Shi'ite state with a religious administrative system existed. This situation did not change much during the period of the Buyid dynasty (mid 10th to mid 11th century), who had been Persians and (according to our present knowledge) Twelver Shi'ites. The Buyids opted for coexistence with the existing Abbasid state, which they chose to control rather than destroy. Nevertheless, the Buyids were not only patrons of science, letters, and art, but also of Twelver Shi'ite learning. Several of the most authoritative figures of Shi'ite learning flourished under their rule.[30] The Buyid era has been termed - somewhat misleadingly, perhaps - the "Renaissance of Islam",[31] as Islamic intellectual life in general experienced a certain "rebirth". A very significant side-effect of the Buyid age - with certain long-term effects for the Twelver Shi'ite community at large - was the foundation of the Shi'ite study centre at Najaf in Iraq by the jurist Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. al-Hasan al-Tusi[32] (d. 1068), known among Twelver Shi'ites as "Shaikh al-Ta'ifah" (the teacher of the [Shi'ite] community), which could well be called the "birth hour" of the Twelver Shi'ite educational system and hierarchical structure of its scholars. The institutionalization of Shi'ite days of commemoration, such as '*Âshura*' which shall be discussed soon, also falls into that period. As all political and religious power during the time of the "major occultation" could have well been considered illegitimate,

---

30. For a comprehensive introduction to the Twelver Shi'ite scholars of the Buyid period see Wahid Akhtar, *The Early Imamiyyah Thinkers* (New Delhi, 1988).

31. See J. E. Kraemer, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam. The Cultural Revival during the Buyid Age* (Leiden, 1992), a work, which, otherwise, draws a fascinating and comprehensive picture of the intellectual and cultural achievements during the Buyid period.

32. On him see C. Marcinkowski, "Rapprochement and Fealty during the Buyids and Early Saljuqs: The Life and Times of Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Tusi," *Islamic Studies* 40, no. 2 (Summer 2001), pp. 273-96. Not to be confused with the famous scientist Khwajah Nasir al-Din al-Tusi of the Mongol period.

Twelver scholars did not see any difficulty in arranging themselves with Buyid temporal power. This quietist feature, which can also be observed throughout the rest of Twelver Shi'ite history, is remarkable and quite in contrast to what is usually thought of Shi'ism, especially in light of events in post-1979 Iran that led to the (in the light of what has just been said) rather abnormal circumstance of the establishment of clerical rule. Another very significant feature of this period that has a bearing on the Twelver Shi'ite intellectual tradition to this day is the flourishing and further development of Islamic speculative theology (*kalam*) and philosophy by Shi'ite scholars, pre-eminent among them being al-Sharif al-Murtada'(d. 1041 C.E.). Buyid tolerance protected these scholars and intellectuals from the fanaticism of their opponents. The end of the Buyids under the onslaught of the Sunni Seljuk Turks towards the middle of the 11th century interrupted this development temporarily. When considering the fact of prevailing quietism throughout Twelver Shi'ite history, it should be kept in mind that the Buyid era - aside from the Mongol period – was the only point in time before the Safavid dynasty (r. 1501-1722) when Twelver Shi'ites had also obtained some degree of political influence.

In spite of the horrible destructions and loss of lives, the coming of the Mongols to Iran and Iraq and the destruction of the Abbasid universal Sunni caliphate caused by them in 1258 brought relief to the Twelver Shi'ites as it did to other minorities, in particular the Christians. This was primarily so because the Mongols (known in the context of Persian history as the "Ilkhans"), being non-Muslims at the time of their arrival, did not favour any of the religious groups over the other. Khwajah Nasir al-Din Tusi (d. 1274), the famous Shi'ite philosopher, mathematician, astronomer, theologian, and physician (to name only a few of his fields of contribution), was perhaps the most eminent scholar of that period. Twelver Shi'ite religious study centers also flourished under Ilkhanid rule, and al-Hasan b. Yusuf b. 'Ali b. al-Mutahhar al-Hilli (d. 1326) contributed to the blending of philosophy and traditional religious scholarship into one coherent religious and intellectual system. One of the Ilkhanid rulers even converted to Twelver Shi'ite Islam, an act, however, that had no long-lasting positive effects on the Twelvers as his successors were Sunni Muslims.

More relevantly, however, also within the context of the spread of Islam in South and Southeast India, is the following: The total exhaustion of the surviving population and the terrible general situation of the Muslim community in Iran and Iraq in the aftermath of the Mongol onslaught had brought about a weakening of Sunni "orthodoxy" and legalism. One reason for this was the disappearance of Sunni caliphal power that had stood behind it. A major result was the gradual blending of Sufism with folk Islam and popular movements, alongside a strong reverence for the Twelver Imams, without necessarily being "officially" Shi'ite". Almost all of the Sufi "orders" (*tariqat*), for instance, referred to 'Ali as the "pole" (*qutb*), first member in the chain of transmission of spiritual knowledge. In Iran and Iraq, Shi'ite tendencies had been always present in the past among the populace, tendencies that could now become somewhat brought to the surface. Most of those "Persianized" Sufi orders spread and "branched out" in particular to India, from where they took the way further east to what is now Malaysia and Indonesia.[33]

With regard to Iran, this period of "blending" culminated finally in the establishment of the Safavid state (1501-1722), a period which marked the watershed in Twelver as well as Iranian history.[34] The Safavids, originally a Twelver Shi'ite Sufi order turned militant which incorporated strong elements of folk Islam, were able to unify the Persian lands by founding a monarchy. Under their rule, Twelver Shi'ite scholars were - for the first time in their history - encouraged to join the administrative fabric of the political order. As outlined by the administrative manual *Dastur al-Muluk*,[35] Twelver ulama now became part of "the system", for

---

33. See J. S. Trimingham,. *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford, 1971), which is, to the mind of the present author, still the most comprehensive work on the subject.

34. It should be noted here that several "Persianized" Twelver Shi'ite states in southern India acknowledged the suzerainty of the Safavids. This is of some consequence with regard to the issue of the historical presence of Twelver Shi'ism in Southeast Asia, as outlined by me in my forthcoming book *Shi'ite Islam in Southeast Asia.*

35. *Dastur al-Muluk* (Regulations for Kings), one of only a few surviving relevant sources, has been translated and studied recently: see C. Marcinkowski, *Mirza Rafi'a's* Dastur al-Muluk: *A Manual of Later Safavid Administration. Annotated English Translation, Comments on the Offices and Services, and Facsimile of the Unique Persian Manuscript* (Kuala Lumpur, 2002).

instance, as appointed religious judges.[36] However, it is very important to state at this point that – contrary to their Sunni "colleagues" - they were not entirely dependant upon the state as they also received other income, such as from *Khums* (the "Fifth"). *Khums*, a kind of additional "income tax" that is to be paid by the faithful and in part received by the Twelver ulama, shall be further referred to again below. From the Safavid period onwards, it had been those additional funds that had enabled them to also stay politically independent and to raise their voice when they saw it fit.

The Safavid period was also the time of the great revival of Islamic philosophy, known as *hikmah* ("wisdom"), perhaps the most significant contribution of the Safavid period and personified in high-calibre scholars such as Mir Damad (d. 1631 C.E.) and above all Mulla Sadra Shirazi (d. 1640 C.E.).[37] This philosophical movement is usually referred to as "The School of Isfahan" or the "Ishraqi (i.e. Illuminationist) School". The Illuminationist School believed that true wisdom was the product of both reason and intuition. One could arrive at a part of the truth through the philosophy of Aristotle and the Islamic rationalist philosopher Avicenna (d. 1037). This "partial truth", however, was not sufficient. In order to arrive at "full truth", one would have to achieve mystical vision or illumination through fasting, self-denial, and mystical practices. The "Ishraqi" philosophers referred to this world of visions as the "realm of images". These images would give the individual access to divine truth. It is remarkable that this intellectual movement came about in Persia at a time when legalism was predominating in large parts of the remainder of the Islamic world.

The Safavids, who claimed descent from the Prophet and who legitimated their political power religiously, had been able to rein in the

---

36. However, another remarkable feature that cannot be elaborated here further is that the Safavid rulers also established a parallel quasi-secular legal administrative system which has been described in detail in the *Dastur al-Muluk*. Apparently, this was done in order to keep the ulama in check.

37. For an introduction to his thought see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Mulla Sadra and His Transcendent Philosophy* (Tehran, 1997, 2nd ed.).

ulama by integrating most of them into the administrative framework. However, the collapse of the Safavid state in 1722 and the ensuing vacuum of political power that saw foreign invaders as well as several regional dynasties and warlords fighting each other, left the Shi'ite ulama as the sole independent points of reference, at least in the eyes of the wider strata of the population.

Also during the 18th century, theological issues among the Twelver Shi'ite learned community, already dating back to the early 17th century (if not to the formative period of Islam itself), again came to the surface, dividing them into two camps known as *Akhbaris* and *Usulis*. They shall be referred to here in brief only insofar as they have a certain bearing on the unsolved question of authority in Shi'ite Islam.

The *Akhbaris* (from Arab. *khabar*, plur. *akhbar*, "news", "report", as a synonym to *hadith*) on the one hand, were of the view that knowledge of Islam and its stipulations is to be derived solely from the Traditions of the Prophet and the Imams. They did not accept the other tools usually employed in Islamic jurisprudence and advocated by their fierce opponents, the *Usulis*, such as analogy etc. The *Akhbaris* had been initially influential, especially in the 17th century, but were finally overcome by the *Usulis*, their fierce opponents among the Twelver scholars. Ultimately, the *Akhbari* position went in the direction of assuming the necessity of a kind of "inspiration" by the hidden Twelfth Imam through a living representative, known as "Gate" (Arab. *bab*), when interpreting the Qur'an and the Traditions. The *Shaykhis*, an offshoot of the *Akhbaris*, went a step further which finally culminated in the *Babi* and *Baha'i* movements that have actually left Islam.

The *Usulis* (*usul* being the Arab. plur. of *asl*, "root", "origin") were to become the mainstream factor of Twelver jurisprudence from the late 18th century onwards and have since then dominated Shi'ite legal as well as political thought. Their rise to prominence is in fact one of the results of the collapse of Safavid power in the early 18th century. During Persia's Qajar period (1781-1925), an era marked by several episodes of foreign political intervention and lost wars, *usuli* ulama were

able to challenge royal power on a variety of occasions,[38] sometimes from within Persia, sometimes from neighboring Iraq.[39] The emergence of the idea of *taqlid* (here solely in the context of "emulation" of a living leading legal Shi'ite scholar and to be discussed shortly) goes back to the 19th century and the Qajar period. Moreover, the final steps toward the establishment of a kind of hierarchy with appellations such as "Ayatollah" (Arab. "Âyat Allah", literally "Sign of God"), were also adopted during that period.

Unfortunately, the limitations set by the present study do not allow us here to elaborate further on the role played by Twelver ulama in the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906, known as *Mashrutiyyat* in Persian, and on the interchanges that took place in the course of it between the Shi'ite clerics of Iraq and Iran.[40] Here, it suffices perhaps to mention that the Constitutional Revolution was an attempt to preserve the religious and cultural framework of the country by adopting a parliamentary system with a constitutional monarchy. Shi'ite ulama in and outside the country took sides, either in favour of or against the abolishment of absolutistic Qajar rule. The failure of the Constitutional Revolution, a project, which could well have led to the birth of some sort of "indigenous Islamic form of democracy" that could be of interest to today's discourse on 'political Islam', led ultimately to the end of the Qajar regime and the establishment of the Pahlavi monarchy which lasted until 1979.

38. For comprehensive background studies see N. Keddie, "The Roots of the Ulama's Power in Modern Iran," *Studia Islamica* 29 (1969), pp. 31-53; eadem, *Roots of Revolution. An Interpretive History of Modern Iran* (New Haven and London, 1981); eadem, *Religion and Politcs in Iran. Shi'ism from Quietism to Revolution* (New Haven and London, 1983).

39   C. Marcinkowski, *Religion and Politics in Iraq. Shi'ite Clerics between Quietism and Resistance*. With a foreword by Professor Hamid Algar, University of California at Berkeley (Singapore, 2004), p. 1.

40. For good overviews see Abdul-Hadi Hairi, "Why did the 'Ulama Participate in the Persian Constitutional Revolution 1905-1909?," *Die Welt des Islams* 17 (1976-77), pp. 127-54; idem, *Shi'ism and Constitutionalism in Iran. A Study of the Role Played by the Persian Residents in Iraq in Iranian Politics* (Leiden, 1977); idem, "Shaykh Fazl Allah Nuri's Refutation of the Idea of Constitutionalism," *Middle Eastern Studies* 13, no. 3 (Oct. 1977), pp. 327-39.

Under the Pahlavi regime (as well as in neighbouring Iraq, for that matter), Shi'ite clerics from the early 1930s onwards became increasingly marginalized from society due to various reforms introduced by the new regime, such as the somewhat more progressive legislation pertaining to women's rights and the secularization of large sectors of society. However after World War II in particular, some of those measures, such as the cult intending to glorify pre-Islamic Iran introduced by the last Pahlavi ruler from the 1960s onwards, were increasingly perceived as alien by the wider strata of the Iranian population. Economic difficulties during the 1970s which resulted in a high rate of unemployment as well as the often brutal treatment of the regime is political opposition contributed to unrest which ultimately led to its fall in the course of the revolution of 1979.[41]

Ayatollah Khomeini's (Khumayni) idea of a supposed leading, descisive political role for Twelver Shi'ite ulama, as expounded by him in a series of lectures subsequently published under the title "On the Government of the Islamic Jurisprudent" (*Velayat-e faqih*),[42] is usually seen as the quasi "inspiration" of the revolution. Contrary, however, to what is commonly thought, in particular in the West, one should note that the revolution was brought about due to a variety of political forces which were as distinct from each other as the Marxist Tudeh Party or the clerical ultras around Khomeini, and by dissidents as different in their political outlook and social analysis as Ayatollah Murtada Mutahhari (1920-79)[43] and 'Ali Shari'ati (1933-77).[44] Moreover, the majority of the leading

---

41.   For an interpretation of those events from the point of view of a convert to Twelver Shi'ism who is at the same time a professor of Islamic Studies at Berkeley see Hamid Algar, *Roots of the Islamic Revolution in Iran (Four Lectures)* (Oneonta NY, 2001, rev. and expanded ed.).

42.   Sayyid Ruhullah Khumayni, *Velayat-e faqih* [On the government of the Islamic jurisprudent], Tehran, 1361 AH solar/1982 (in Persian). On some aspects of Khomeini's political thought see N. Calder, "Accommodation and Revolution in Imami Shi'i Jurisprudence: Khumayni and the Classical Tradition," *Middle Eastern Studies* 28 (1982), pp. 3-20, V. Martin, "Religion and State in Khumaini's *Kashf al-Asrar*," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 56, pt. 1 (1993), pp. 34-45, and eadem, "A Comparison between Khumaini's Government of the Jurist and the *Commentary on Plato's Republic* of Ibn Rushd," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 7, no. 1 (January 1996), pp. 16-31.

43.   On him see Mahmoud Davari, *The Political Thought of Ayatollah Murtaza Mutahhari. An Iranian Theoretician of the Islamic State* (London, 2005).

44.   On him see Ali Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shariati* (London, 2000). For some see Ali Shariati, tr. Hamid Algar, *On the Sociology of Islam: Lectures* (Berkeley CA, 2000).

Ayatollahs stayed either silent or even opposed Khomeini's concept of *Velayat-e faqih*, preferring a rather quietist approach. One of them was the Najaf-based "Grand Ayatollah" Sayyid Abu 'l-Qasim al-Khui (1899-1992), who at one point was considered the premiere leader of the Twelver Shi'ites throughout the world.[45]

It is hoped that the above discussion has sufficiently demonstrated that there does not exist something such as an "authoritative, coherent, or dominating view" among Twelver Shi'ites with regard to how to arrange the political affairs of the community during the time of the Twelfth Imam's "major occultation". This is important to understand in particular with regard to policy-making, in order to arrive at an *appropriate* and fact-oriented picture of current Twelver Shi'ite political thought, a picture that is still all too often dominated by fears and anxieties caused by sensational reports on events such as the current "nuclear crisis". Although Twelver Shi'ite Islam cannot not necessarily be described in terms of a kind of "peace movement reminiscent" of the "Flower Power" era of the 1960s, it has been, and still is, to the mind of the present writer, essentially quietist in nature. This is quite contrary to views that tend to overestimate a political role that Shi'ite clerics are supposed to play. In a remarkable article entitled "Fear not the Shias", Stephen Schwartz, Director of the Islam and Democracy Program at the Washington-based non-partisan think-tank Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, states that,

> [u]nlike the Saudi Wahhabis, Shia Muslims have never sought to impose their dispensation on the whole of the Islamic world community; nor have they attempted to impose theological conformity within their own ranks. Their tradition recognizes the rights of minorities, because they have always been a minority, and esteems differences in opinion, because their very existence erises from controversy and debate. In Iran, Shia Islam took an anti-Western direction that had more to do with the history of the Iranians and their relations with Britain and the United States than with their understanding

---

45.   Marcinkowski, *Religion and Politics in Iraq*, pp. 89-92.

of Islam. Elsewhere in the Islamic world – in places like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the Albanian lands – Shias are best known for their commitment to education, enlightenment, the liberation of women, social justice, progress and, most important, idependence of thought, or ijtihad.[46]

We shall leave this for the time being and turn our attention now to some of the practical issues of Twelver Shi'ite Islam, as distinct from Sunnism.

Aspects of Twelver Shi'ite Social Life and Religious Practice

Twelver Shi'ites differ not significantly with regard to the tenets and prescriptions that are part of the Sunni "five pillars of Islam", such as daily ritual prayer and fasting. However, they do categorize them in the following manner, dividing them into *Usul al-Din*, (Roots of Religion or matters of belief) and *Furu al-Din*, (Branches of Religion or legal matters:)[47]

Usul al-Din, (Roots of Religion):

(1)   *Tawhid* (Oneness): The Oneness of God

(2)   *'Adl* (Justice): The Justice of God. According to Twelver thought, God is bound by His own promise of justice. This concept is not shared by mainstream Ash'arite Sunnism as

---

46.   S. Schwartz, "Fear not the Shias," *The Weekly Standard*, March 23, 2006, vol. 8, issue 27, available online at http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/002/361ssuxr.asp, (accessed on March 24, 2006).

47.   Essentially from the Mongol period onwards, especially since Hasan b. Yusuf b. 'Ali b. al-Mutahhar al-Hilli's (d. 1326) well-known treatise *Al-Bab al-hadi 'ashar*, the principles of Twelver Shi'ite theology appear to have been arranged in the above way. I have based this on several rather apologetic but nevertheless authoritative works of more recent date which are readily available in English and (according to my own observations) also very popular among "converts" to Shi'ism, especially in Southeast Asia: Muhammad Rida Muzaffar, *The Faith of Shi'a Islam* (Dubai, n.d., reprint) [title of the Arab. original: *Aqa'id al- al-imamiyyah*]; Ja'far Sobhani, *Doctrines of Shi'i Islam. A Compendium of Imami Believes and Practices* (London and New York, 2002); Muhammad Husayn Âl Kashif al-Ghita, *The Origins of Shi'ite Islam and its Principles* (Qumm, 1982, reprint) [original title in Arabic: *Asl al-shi'ah wa usuluha*].

they see in it a contradiction to His omnipotence. The Mu'tazilites, however, today an almost extinct line of Sunni theological thought, agree with it.

(3) *Nubuwwah* (Prophethood): The belief in the prophethood of Muhammad and all the other prophets mentioned in the Qur'an. This also includes the belief in their infallibility (*'ismah*), which the Sunni's do not accept.

(4) *Imamah* (political and spiritual leadership): God has appointed specific leaders to lead and guide mankind — a prophet appoints a custodian of the religion before his death. Imams do not receive Revelation but do share the prophetic attribute of infallibility.

(5) *Ma'ad* (Belief in the Afterlife, bodily Resurrection and the Day of Judgment).

Furu' al-Din (Branches of Religion):

(1) *Salat* (Prayer), obiligatory prayers five times a day, *namaz* in Persian.

(2) *Sawm* (fasting), fasting during the month of Ramadan.

(3) *Hajj* (Pilgrimage), performing the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once during lifetime.

(4) *Zakat* (Poor-rate), paying the poor-tax.

(5) *Khums* (the "Fifth"), paying another tax. *Khums* is of special significance for securing the financial independence of Twelver clerics thus enabling them to take a more active stand in public life and politics than their Sunni colleagues, most of are whom today state-employees.

(6)   *Jihad* (literally "Struggle"), struggling "for the sake of God". Traditionally, in Shi'ite as well as Sunni pertinent literature, this is usually presented as referring to the "inner struggle" or "greater *jihad*" (*al-jihad al-akbar*) against the evil within one's soul in every aspect of life. The "lesser *jihad*" (*al-jihad al-asghar*) is the one usually referred to in Western literature as "Holy War".

(7)   *Al-Amr bi'-l-Ma'ruf*, literally "commanding [and enforcing] what is good", thus also putting into action the stipulations of Islamic law.

(8)   *Al-Nahi 'an il-Munkar*, literally "forbidding what is evil", connected with the previous point.

(9)   *Tawalla*, loving the family of the Prophet (*Ahl al-Bayt*) and their followers, i.e. the Shi'ites.

(10)   *Tabarra*, dissociating oneself from the enemies of *Ahl al-Bayt* and the Shi'ites.

Remembering Karbala': *Ta'ziyyah*

Aside from certain Shi'ite key issues, such as *Imamah* and *Khums*, for instance, most of the above-mentioned items are agreed upon by Sunni's and Shi'ites. However, there are also several aspects of "devotional practice" that continue to cause ruptures between Sunni's and Shi'ites up to the present day. Some of them shall be referred to in the following as they also have a bearing on Shi'ite social life in the Southeast Asian context. Others, such as *ziyarah* or the visiting of shrines and tombs of the Imams and their descendants,[48] shall be disregarded here as they have no direct bearing on the daily life of Shi'ites in the Southeast Asian context

---

48.   It should be noted here in passing, that the paying of respect to the tombs of saintly persons is also a feature of mainstream Sunnism.

One of them is the Shi'ite performance of *Ta'ziyyah*. The tragic death of al-Husayn – after all the grandson of the Prophet - and his relatives and companions in the battle of Karbala' in 680 C.E. on the tenth day (*'Âshura'*) of the Islamic lunar month of Muharram is commemorated every year throughout the Shi'ite world until today. The particular ceremonies which take place during that time in countries and regions with a significant Twelver Shi'ite population are known as *Ta'ziyyah* ("consolation"). The term *ta'ziyyah* is usually, somewhat misleadingly, translated into English as "Passion Play", in reminiscence to medieval European Christian liturgical drama and mystery plays. *Ta'ziyyah*, however, often involves processions with theatrical performances and rituals of self-mortification during which, male participants beat their chests and backs with chains. In some parts of the Indian subcontinent men cut also their forehead with a sword, a practice that was banned by leading Shi'ite scholars of Iraq and Iran.[49] During those days of mourning, Shi'ite preachers, in Persian called *rawza-khwans*, retell the story of al-Husayn and his friends in lamenting voice, moving the listeners often to tears. Sometimes, however, they use the occasion also to "remind" the audience to "remember" the "great injustice" (*zulm*) suffered throughout history (and at present) by the Shi'ites at the hands of "tyrants" – Sunni's, Shi'ite's, and non-Muslims alike. As a matter of fact, *Ta'ziyyah* gatherings, which are often attended by crowds of several ten-thousands, had often been banned for "security concerns" in the past, especially during the years of the Saddam dictatorship in Iraq and also during the rule of the last Shah of Iran. It is noteworthy that some of the major demonstrations against the Shah that finally led to the Iranian revolution and to his overthrow, had often taken part during those Muharram processions. The therefrom resulting violent clashes with the army and police left hundreds dead, only further fuelling the zealous spirit of the attending crowd, as they could now identify with the tragic events of the past. *Ta'ziyyah* in the style just outlined perhaps dates back to the

---

49.   For some classical studies on this issue refer to P. J. Chelkowski (ed.), *Ta'ziyeh. Ritual and Drama in Iran* (New York, 1979); Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of Ashura in Twelver Shi'ism* (The Hague, 1978); W. Ende, "Flagellations of Muharram and the Shi'ite 'Ulama'," *Der Islam* 55, no. 1 (1978), pp. 19-39. For a study of *Ta'ziyyah* in the particular context of the southern Indian city of Hyderabad see D. Pinault, *The Shiites: Ritual and Popular Piety in a Muslim Community* (London, 1992).

10th century C.E., when its public celebration (along with that of other particularly Shi'ite significance and flavour) was sanctioned for the first time by the Iranian Buyid dynasty, who were themselves most probably Twelver Shi'ites.[50] Although Sunni's, also condemn the killing of al-Husayn they usually consider the Shi'ite Muharram ceremonies as an "exaggeration". In Pakistan particularly, violent clashes between Shi'ites and Sunni's use to occur on a regular basis, especially during the Shi'ite mourning ceremonies. Throughout the Shi'ite world, a particular local flavour is added to those ceremonies when the Shi'ite elegies are chanted in the local language. As noticed by the present writer at several occasions, Shi'ite Muslims in Malaysia, for instance, have "created" their own corpus of elegies in the Malay language. Due to the, for Shi'ites in particular, somewhat less encouraging situation in that country, Muharram ceremonies, attended also by an annually increasing number of Malay Muslims, used to be performed only on the exterritorial compound of the Iranian embassy in Kuala Lumpur.

"Temporary Marriage" (*mut'ah*)

Another point of heated controversy between Shi'ites and Sunni's is the issue of "temporary marriage" (*nikah mut'ah*) and its permissibility, which the former accept and the latter reject. Recently, this issue also caused some discussion in Southeast Asia, in particular in Malaysia. The issue of *mut'ah* (as it is usually simply referred to) is highly controversial in the Islamic world. Twelver Shi'ites do consider it something already referred to in the Qur'an and thus beneficial in daily life, whereas Sunni's tend to see in it nothing more than extramarital sex and fornication. Apparently in accordance with the historical facts, Shi'ites usually state that *mut'ah* was practiced at the time of the Prophet, that it was thus endorsed by him, and that it was only abolished (along with other practices of the time of the Prophet) by the second caliph 'Umar b. al-Khattab (r. 634-44 C.E.). Both, Shi'ite and Sunni's scholars, seem to agree that the Prophet tolerated it and that his Companions did in fact practice it, which is quite remarkable in light of

---

50. See C. Marcinkowski, "The Buyid Domination as the Historical Background for the Flourishing of Muslim Scholarship During the 4th/10th Centuries," *Iqbal Review* 45, no. 4 (October 2004), pp. 83-99.

the harsh criticism from the part of the Sunni's today. Sunni scholars of the past, such as al-Tabari, Ibn Kathir and Imam Muslim, were of the view that Qur'an 4:24 refers to "temporal marriage".[51] It was practised during the lifetime of the Prophet who is said to have "encouraged" his Companions, some of whom practiced *mut'ah* even during the rules of both Abu Bakr (r. 623-34) and 'Umar, the first and second Caliphs, respectively.[52] The further course of the debate in history has been recorded in some detail by Gribtez in his study and shall thus not concern us here further.[53] In the following, a mere outline of major characteristics of its practice shall be given.

According to all legal "schools" of Islamic law, *mut'ah* is a 'fixed-time marriage' with a preset duration.[54] After the expiry of this period, the marriage is automatically dissolved. In some aspects, *mut'ah* is similar to "permanent marriage" (*nikah*), with the major difference that a date of expiration for the marriage is already stated in the marriage contract. The duration is decided by the couple involved. There are no restrictions about minimum duration. *Mut'ah* can also be transformed into a "permanent marriage" if the couple wishes to do so. Once married, the couple is considered husband and wife, just as in the case of a "permanent marriage". However, in contrast to a "permanent marriage", *mut'ah* does not need a formal divorce (*talaq*) upon expiry of the contract. According to Shi'ite law, however, it is recommended (*mustahab*) to either extend the

---

51. According to a highly authoritative source, Imam Muslim (Tradition no. 3432), Qur'an 4:24 was revealed on the occasion of the battle of Hunayn in the year 9 AH/631 C.E., thus only one year before the death of the Prophet. In 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali's translation, 4:24 runs as follows: "Also (prohibited are) women already married, *except those whom your right hands possess*: thus has Allah ordained (prohibitions) against you: except for these, all others are lawful, provided you seek them in marriage) with gifts from your property – desiring chastity, not lust. Seeing that you derive benefit from them, give them their dowers (at least) as prescribed; but if, after a dower is prescribed, you agree mutually (to vary it), there is no blame on you, and Allah is All-Knowing, All-Wise" (emphasis mine).

52. According to Imam Muslim, Tradition no. 3248.

53. See A. Gribtez, *Strange Bedfellows. Mut'at Al-Nisa' and Mut'at Al-Hajj: A Study Based on Sunni and Shi'i Sources of Tafsir, Hadith and Fiqh* (Berlin, 1994).

54. The following description of the Twelver Shi'ite practice of "temporary marriage" is based on Al-Sayyid al-Imam Abu'l-Qasim al-Khu'i (tr. M. Faizal Haq), *Articles of Islamic Faith (al-Fatawa)* (Accra, 1982) [title of the Arabic original: *Tawdhih al-masa'il*].

marriage or to transform it into a permanent one. If the woman wants to marry another man after the expiry of the *mut'ah* she can do so without observing the usual *'iddah* (menstrual period after a divorce, during which a woman may not marry another man).

There are other stipulations more with regard to *mut'ah* that have aroused the anger of Sunni's. According to Twelver Shi'ite law, the husband may end the *mut'ah* before the contract expires. If he does so and they have had sexual intercourse, he must pay her the full dowry (*mahr*). If they did not have intercourse, he must give her half that amount, although the recommended precaution is that he should give her the full *mahr*. Other significant aspects involving a "temporary marriage" are that (1) the couple does not inherit from each other, as the marriage is not considered "permanent" and subsequently man and women are really "united"; (2) the husband is considered financially responsible for any offspring from this type of marriage; (3) the relations between man and woman are not considered to lead to a family life (as the marriage is not a permanent one); thus, the woman is allowed to work and spend her money as she chooses and she does not need to provide for a family; as a result, the husband does not need not to take care of his wife's expenses; (4) the wife may leave her house against her husband's will.

Another highly significant aspect of *mut'ah*, especially with regard to its practice in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious context such as Southeast Asia, is that only in this particular form of marriage, Twelver Shi'ite jurisprudence[55] (*fiqh*) allows Muslim men to marry women from followers of other monotheistic religions with "revealed" scriptures (*Ahl al-Kitab*, "People of the Book"). By convention, this is usually meant to refer to Christians and Jews, although during certain periods of Islamic history, Zoroastrians, and even Hindus and Buddhists, seem to have been included in this category. Twelver Shi'ism does not provide for

---

55. For an introduction to Twelver Shi'ite fiqh see Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence: According to Shi'i Law* (London, 2005) [title of the original Arabic: *Durus fi 'ilm al-usul* (Discourses on the Science of the Principles of Jurisprudence)]. For the Sunnite perspective see Mohammad Hashim Kamali, Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence (Cambridge, 2005, 3rd ed.), and Wael Hallaq, *A History of Islamic Legal Theories: An Introduction to Sunni usul al-fiqh* (Cambridge, 1999, new ed.).

"permanent marriage" with "People of the Book", apparently based on Qur'an 2:221.[56] Thus, for a Twelver Shi'ite Muslim, a "marriage-like" relationship with a woman from that "category" would only be possible under the rules and stipulations of *mut'ah*. In contrast to this, Sunni's (in particular the Hanafite "school" of law, which is usually considered the most liberal) allow "permanent marriage" with the *Ahl al-Kitab*, based on Qur'an 5:5.[57]

At any rate, as a kind of further "stimulator" for the practicing of *mut'ah* serves the circumstance that Twelver Shi'ite jurisprudence does not limit the number of wives that a man is allowed to marry in "temporary marriage" up to a maximum of four (as it does, with the rest of the Muslims, in the case of "permanent marriage"). According to the Shi'ite view, this is mainly because the husband is not required to support his wife. Thus, the marriage is not considered permanent and the conditions for the restriction of having no more than four wives do not apply. On the other hand, a woman who is still a virgin (apparently, regardless of her age) still needs the consent of a "legal guardian" (*wali*) if she wishes to enter into *mut'ah*. Apparently, this is mainly in order to protect her "inexperience". Even though there are no requirements in Shi'ite jurisprudence for having witnesses or a written contract when entering a marriage, most people prefer to resort to both. In practice, however, this contract tends to be completed in the presence of a Shi'ite cleric.

In particular among Malaysian "converts" to Twelver Shi'ism (former Sunni's), the issue of *mut'ah* appears to have caused special interest and it

---

56. "*Do not marry unbelieving women* (idolaters) until they believe: a slave woman who believes is better than an unbelieving woman, even though she allures you. Nor marry (your girls) to unbelievers until they believe: a man slave [sic!] who believes is better than an unbeliever, even though he allures you. Unbelievers (but) beckon you to the Fire. But Allah beckons by His Grace to the Garden (of Bliss) and forgiveness, and makes His Signs clear to mankind: that they may celebrate His praise" (emphasis mine).

57. "This day are (all) things good and pure made lawful unto you. The food of the People of the Book is lawful unto you and yours is lawful unto them. (Lawful unto you in marriage) are (not only) chaste women who are believers, but chaste *women among the People of the Book, revealed before your time* - when you give them their due dowers, and desire chastity, not lewdness. If anyone rejects faith, fruitless is his work, and in the Hereafter he will be in the ranks of those who have lost (all spiritual good)" (emphasis mine).

31

would be almost impossible to list the large number of websites reflecting the online queries and discussions that are current among them regarding this topic. Obviously, there are several "advantages" which contribute to the continued popularity of *mut'ah*, especially among young Shi'ites: Some people who experienced the ups and downs of a "permanent marriage" and who went through a divorce may decide to try *mut'ah* instead. Moreover, some may argue that - more in line with contemporary lifestyles - *mut'ah* enables younger partners "to get to know each other better" before entering into a long-term commitment. In practice, however, such an arrangement often tends to lead into a "permanent marriage", as a female virgin would require her "legal guardian's" consent to marry, which is usually granted only if the target of this arrangement is a "permanent marriage". Parents may not give their consent to a *mut'ah* which is based on pure pleasure. Another reason perhaps to opt for *mut'ah*, even as a long-term, quasi "permanent", solution, is that it gives women in particular more personal freedom than a "permanent marriage" as already mentioned earlier. Others may choose *mut'ah* with somebody they do not intend to enter in to any kind of sexual or marital relationship with, but with whom they have to spend a lot of time, for instance, as colleagues when sharing the same office alone. Lastly, *mut'ah* may also be used (or misused, depending on the perspective) solely for the purpose of obtaining sexual pleasure. It goes without saying that this point has been used most frequently by Sunni's in their rejection of the whole institution of "temporary marriage".

"Prudent Dissimulation" (*taqiyyah*)

Other issues between Sunni's and Shi'ites that are, at times, also a point of contention, in particular among Southeast Asian Muslims, are the practices of *taqiyyah* (dissimulation of one's actual beliefs in times of danger) and *taqlid* ("imitation", "emulation"). Usually, they are associated solely with the Shi'ites by their opponents. However, similar as in the case with the rules pertaining to the "modest dressing" of women, widely known as *hijab*, *Taqiyyah*, does not constitute a part of either *Usul al-Din* or *Furu' al-Din* which have been discussed earlier. Nevertheless, when confronted with this issue, Shi'ites usually refer to the following two passages of the Qur'an which seem to sanction it:

Anyone who, after accepting faith in Allah, utters Unbelief – except under compulsion, his heart remaining firm in Faith - but such as open their breast to Unbelief – on them is Wrath from Allah, and theirs will be a dreadful Penalty (16:106);

Let not the believers take for *trustees* [or: *confidants; awliya'*; 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali has "friends or helpers"] Unbelievers rather than Believers: if any do that, in nothing will there be help from Allah: *except by way of precaution [tattaqu*, from the same root as *taqiyyah*], that you may guard yourselves from them [*tuqatan*, again from the same root as *taqiyyah*]. But Allah cautions you (to remember) Himself; for the final goal is to Allah (3:28; emphasis mine).

Shi'ites usually tend to see in these two verses the key message that they should not take non-believers as "trustees"(*awliya'*) or "condidantes" against fellow (in particular Shi'ite) Muslims. The stronger translation "trustees" favoured here by me – instead of 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali's erroneous and somewhat weaker interpretation "friends or helpers", which is usually also "read into" the qur'anic text by the wider Muslim public – is, to the mind of the present writer, entirely legitimate. This is because the equivalent to "friends" in Arabic would be *asdiqa'*. Friendship with non-Muslims, in turn, is completely acceptable and even encouraged in Islam. Moreover, Shi'ites – in the course of history often a minority severely persecuted by Sunni "state" Islam - see in taqiyyah a means of self-preservation. Without the intention of appearing somewhat too "aplogetic" here on behalf of the tenets of Twelver Shi'ism, one could well argue that – far from being an act of hypocrisy – the practicing of "dissimulation" would rather be recommended by common sense when facing deadly danger. Sunni's, in turn, usually do not accept *taqiyyah* and blame Shi'ites for practicing it. It might be retorted, that history, has also proven that the practice of *taqiyyah* is nothing that strange to Sunni Muslims themselves, as they too may have practiced it when being presented by the Spanish Inqusition of 15th-century Spain with the prospect of being burned at the stake.

Some of the classical views on *taqiyyah* held by early leading Shi'ite scholars of the Buyid period have been studied by Kohlberg.[58] Here, it shall suffice to refer to only two of those scholars: The first, Al-Kulayni (d. between 939 and 941 C.E.),[59] was the compiler of *al-Kafi* ("The Sufficient"), the most famous one of the four canonical collections of Twelver *Hadith*. Until today, Twelvers ascribe to Al-Kulayni a high degree of authenticity as he was a contemporary of the events leading to the "major occultation" of the Twelfth Imam which is supposed to have taken place in the same year of his death. In order to make his point, al-Kulayni usually preferred to select Traditions rather than giving his own opinion, but this selection is often telling with regard to the views that he himself may have held with regard to the practice of *taqiyyah*. He quotes Muhammad al-Baqir, the fifth Imam as stating that "the practicing of *taqiyyah* is always necessary in a desperate situation. The person intending to practice *taqiyyah* knows best how to do that",[60] and several other Traditions to that effect, thus putting the final decision on the responsibility of the individual believer. At another occasion, he quotes a Tradition even to the effect of a steadily increasing significance of *taqiyyah*, as injustice and oppression, are also thought to increase continuously with the progress of time.[61]

The other early scholar referred to here is Ibn Babawayh, known as "al-Shaykh al-Sadiq" (d. 991 C.E.),[62] one the most authoritative Twelver Shi'ite scholars of the late 10th century C.E. He was the compiler of another canonical collection of Traditions and the author of a well-known

58. See E. Kohlberg, "Some Imami-Shi'i Views on *Taqiyya*," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 115 (1975), pp. 395-402.

59. For an introduction to Kulayni and his work see C. Marcinkowski, "Al-Kulayni and His Early Twelver Shi'ite *Hadith*-Compendium *Al-Kafi*. Selected Aspects of the Part *Al-Usul-min al-Kafi*," *Islamic Culture* 74, no. 1 (January 2000), pp. 89-126.

60. Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. Ya'qub b. Ishaq al-Kulayni, *Usul-i Kafi*, 4 vols. (Tehran, n.d.) [Arab. text with Pers. transl.], Tradition no. 2244. For English translations this and several other Traditions quoted by Al-Kulayni see Marcinkowski, Religion and Politics in Iraq, p. 97 and pp. 96-98, respectively.

61. Al-Kulayni, *Usul-i Kafi*, Tradtion no. 2248.

62. C. Marcinkowski, "Twelver Shi'ite Scholarship and Buyid Domination. A Glance on the Life and Times of Ibn Babawayh al-Shaykh al-Sadiq (d. 381 AH/991 C.E.)," *Islamic Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (2001), pp. 199-222.

creed. In this creed he states that the practice of *taqiyyah* is obligatory (*wajib*) at all times and that "one who forsakes it is in the same position as he who forsakes prayer";[63] that is, he would commit a grave sin. According to this scholar, the practice of *taqiyyah* remains in fact an absolute necessity until the awaited return of the hidden twelfth Imam – the Mahdi.[64]

Tenor of all his traditions seems to be that the practice of *taqiyyah* should finally be based on common sense and not on some "hidden agenda", as Shi'ites had been (and still are, as the most recent gruesome experiences in Iraq and Pakistan show) the prime target of persecution.

Shi'ite scholars of more recent times have held similar views. In the following, three of them shall be referred to in brief. All three of them seem to agree that what we call "common sense" today should prevail, and that it is up to the individual believer to decide on which particular action to take.

Shaykh Muhammad Husayn Âl Kashif al-Ghita (1877-1954) was one of the most eminent Iraqi Shi'ite scholars of the first half of the 20th century and also played a considerable part in Iraqi politics during that period.[65] In his popular work *Asl al-shi'ah wa usuluha*, also published in English bearing the title *The Origins of Shi'ite Islam and its Principles*, Âl Kashif al-Ghita tries to defend Twelver Shi'ite practices which had led to controversies with the Sunni's, among them being *Taqqiyyah*. His view of the issue appears to be characterized by a certain degree of moderation, focusing rather on practical matters. Âl Kashif al-Ghita appears not to give preference to one particular option in political discourse, that is to say, neither to *taqiyyah* or quietism, nor to open resistance to a political system conceived as oppressive or unjust by Shi'ites. Rather, his more realistic

---

63. Muhammad b. 'Ali b. Babawayh al-Shaykh al-Saduq (tr. A. A. A. Fyzee), A Shi'ite Creed (Tehran, 1982, reprint) [title of the Arab. original: *I'tiqadat al-imamiyyah*].

64. Ibid, pp. 97-98.

65. On his biography see Marcinkowski, *Religion and Politics in Iraq*, pp. 71-72.

and flexible approach makes the individual decision dependent upon the prevailing circumstances and opportunities.[66]

Shaykh Muhammad Rida al-Muzaffar, has also written on the issue of taqiyyah in his authoritative creed *Aqa'id al-imamiyyah* (literally "Beliefs of the Imamites", i.e. the Twelvers).[67] Shaykh Muzaffar was one of the most influential Iraqi Shi'ite scholars of the 20th century.[68] With regard to the question whether Shi'ites should participate in a non-Shi'ite, or even non-Muslim government, Muzaffar seems to be of the view that such a participation – perhaps even as cabinet ministers - would principally be permissible, or even necessary, in order to benefit the Shi'ite community as a whole and to avert harm from it.[69]

The last Shi'ite scholar referred to here in the context of the issue of *taqiyyah* is the Iranian Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i (1903-81), a traditional cleric but also one of the foremost 20th-century Shi'ite philosophers and intellectual figures.[70] Tabataba'i, among Shi'ites usually simply referred to as "'Allamah", "The Learned", is particularly remembered for his monumental innovative Qur'an commentary in Arabic (*tafsir*) *Al-Mizan* ("The Balance"). His writings appear to be particularly popular among "converts".[71] He is equally popular among advocates as well as opponents of the current political system in Iran. Cooperation between Tabataba'i and Sayyid Husayn Nasr (now a well-known Professor of Islamic philosophy in Washington DC) in the 1960s led to the publication of a book in Persian, entitled Shi'ah dar Islam (Shi'ism in Islam), translated into English and published subsequently by Nasr.[72] In this work, which attempts to give a concise account of the tenets of Islam from the

---

66. Âl Kashif al-Ghita, *The Origins of Shi'ite Islam and its Principles*, pp. 112-15; Marcinkowski, Religion and Politics in Iraq, pp. 74-75.

67. Muzaffar, *The Faith of Shi'a Islam*, pp. 46-47.

68. On his biography see Marcinkowski, *Religion and Politics in Iraq*, p. 75.

69. Muzaffar, *The Faith of Shi'a Islam*, pp. 108-09; Marcinkowski, Religion and Politics in Iraq, p. 77.

70. On his biography see Marcinkowski, *Religion and Politics in Iraq*, pp. 78-79.

71. See, for instance, Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i (tr. W. C. Chittick), *A Sh i'ite Anthology* (Qumm, n.d., reprint).

72. Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i (tr. Sayyed Hossein Nasr), *Shi'a* (Albany NY, 1977, 2nd ed.).

Twelver Shi'ite viewpoint, and is somewhat similar in arrangement and style to the just referred to works by Âl Kashif al-Ghita and Muzaffar, Tabataba'i also provides an outline of his views on "dissimulation". Tabataba'i considers the practice of *taqiyyah* an urgent necessity in situations that involve concrete dangers to honour, life, property, family, and source of income, especially when facing a "hopeless situation," such as internal political oppression by a an all-powerful regime (as that of the last Shah), or an invasion from outside (such as the 1980-88 war between Iraq and Iran).[73] Both events had been witnessed by Tabataba'i, who died in 1981.

"Emulation" (*taqlid*)

The last issue, here only referred to in brief, is the Twelver Shi'ite practice of *taqlid*, another point of heated debate between Sunni's and Shi'ites. *Taqlid*, in the present context, is to be understood in the sense of "following the legal rulings of a Shi'ite Muslim jurist" and not in that of "blind following", which is often the translation in Sunni and Western, literature on Shi'ite Islam.

In presently prevailing Twelver Shi'ite thought, Shi'ites who have not reached the level of *ijtihad* [74] or "independent reasoning with regard to legal matters" (and who are thus not *mujtahids* themselves) are required to follow the rulings of a leading jurist, a *mujtahid*. In Shi'itesm, *mujtahids* are also usually referred to as "Ayatollahs" (lit. "Signs of God"). The most senior among them are called *marja'*, which is a singular in Arabic, the plural being *maraji'*. Commonly, those "senior ayatollahs" are also referred to as *marja' taqlid*,[75] which literally means "Source (or "Reference") of

73. Ibid., pp. 223-24, and 224-25.

74. For the early developments of *ijtihad* in Twelver Shi'ism see N. Calder, "Doubt and Prerogative: The Emergence of an Imami Shi'i Theology of *ijtihad*," Studia Islamica 70 (1989), pp. 57-78; for a more comprehensive dealing see Kazemi-Moussavi, *Religious Authority in Shi'ite Islam. From the Office of Mufti to the Institution of Marja'*. For the development in Sunnite Islam see Wael Hallaq, "Was the Gate of Ijtihad Closed?," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 16, no.1 (March 1984), pp. 3-41.

75. For a good introduction see J. Calmard, "Marja'-i Taklid," in: *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (new ed.), vol. 6 (Leiden, 1986), pp. 548-56; and L. S. Walbridge (ed.), *The Most Learned of the Shi'a. The Institution of the Marja' Taqlid* (Oxford, 2001).

Emulation". In English-language, journalism-style writings they are usually called "grand ayatollahs". In Twelver Shi'ite Islam, *maraji'* are, in practice, the third highest authority on religion and law, right after the Prophet and the Imams. *Taqlid*, "following", has to be done by the ordinary faithful with regard to *Furu al-Din*, i.e. the "Branches of Religion" or "legal" matters, discussed earlier. However, "following" is not permissible with regard to *Usul al-Din*, the "Roots of Religion" or matters of belief, such as the Oneness of God, which ought to be based on one's individual conviction and reasoning. One of the most senior *marja' taqlid* of today is Sayyid 'Ali Sistani, who resides in Najaf, Iraq, and who was born around 1930 in Mashhad, Iran.

Maraji' usually produce a "manual of reference" in Arabic for the believers, often simply referred to as *Risalah* ("Treatise"). The arrangement of topics (from ritual purity until matters of burial and inheritance) has remained virtually unchanged in the course of the last 100 years. The "manuals" are usually translated into several other languages, such as Persian, Urdu, and English. Also available are several translations into Indonesian of similar works by leading Shi'ite clerics, such as works by Ayatollah 'Ali Khaminah'i (Khamenei), Iran's "Supreme Leader".[76] They are thus also accessible to Malay-speaking Muslims.

Concluding Remarks

In view of the present contributor, it needs to be distinguished between what should be referred to as "Intellectual Shi'ism" as a tradition of classical Muslim thought with a long historical footing in the region on the one hand, and "Political Shi'ism" following the events that have taken place in Iran since 1979, on the other. The latter trend appears to be noticeable in the Middle East only since the early 1980s. At first glance (and perhaps based on rather short-range considerations), contemporary policy-makers may be more interested in "Political Shi'ism" rather than its

---

76. Ali Khamenei ('Ali Khaminah'i), *Fatwa-fatwa Ayatullah Al-Uzhma Imam Ali Khamenei: Soal jawab seputar fikih praktis Ahlulbait* [Fatwas by Grand Ayatollah Imam [sic!] Ali Khamenei: Questions and Answers regarding the legal practice of *Ahl al-Bayt*] (Jakarta, 2005) [in Indonesian].

intellectual tradition. However, in order to avoid rashness in their judgment of current events, they should also be aware of the intellectual facet within this religious tradition, a facet which could prove a valuable asset in future. Moreover, such an approach could contribute to a strengthening of the forces of moderation within Islam and the fostering of a climate of dialogue. Lastly, not the demonization of "The Other", but rather the building of bridges of cooperation and understanding where possible, is essential.