Handbook of Islamic Sects and Movements

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BRILL

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Imāmiyya Shīʿa (The Twelvers)

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1 Introduction

Shīʿa is one of the earliest branches within Islam. Shīʿa Muslims today make up a sizable minority among the Muslims around the world (about 15–20% of all Muslims). They are spread throughout the Muslim world, but in most countries, they have a minority position. The exception is countries such as Iran, Iraq and Lebanon, where Shīʿa Muslims make up a majority of the population. Shīʿa theological traditions and institutions have developed in parallel with the Sunnī-dominated theological tradition.

The shaping of Shīʿa within Islam goes back to a conflict over the succession after the death of the prophet Muḥammad. Just after he died in 633, a struggle began between his closest followers that would prove to be of great significance for Islam, for the future development of the Muslim realm, and for creation the tradition of Shīʿa political ideas. The power struggle concerned who was to succeed Muḥammad as leader of the Muslim community. No one could succeed him in his capacity as divine messenger since Muḥammad, according to Islamic doctrine, was the last messenger: "Muḥammad is not the father of any man among you, but a messenger of God, and the seal of the prophets; and God is knower of all things" (Qurʾān 33:40).

One of the parties in the conflict over Muḥammad's successor thought that the role should be filled by one of his oldest followers, in this case, Abū Bakr, who belonged the small band of Muḥammad's closest men. Opposition came from a group who claimed that the leadership should remain within Muḥammad's family. Muḥammad had no sons, so leadership would pass to his cousin ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭalib (600–661), who was married to Muḥammad's daughter Fāṭima (Lambton 1981: 219). According to Shīʿa historical sources, when Muḥammad returned after his last pilgrimage to Mecca, he proclaimed to a large group of assembled Muslims that he had appointed ʿAlī as his successor. This claim is challenged by the Sunnī.

Those who supported ʿAlī's candidacy were called ʿAlī's Party, *Shīʿat ʿAlī*, from which we get the name Shīʿa. The Shīʿa movement was thus motivated by reverence for the prophet Muḥammad's household, *ahl al-bayt*, in particular for his

cousin ʿAlī, his wife, and their children. Shīʿa Muslims viewed Qurʾānic verses as a support for their reverence for the Prophet's household, for example:

> do not display yourselves after the manner of the days of ignorance; and establish prayer, give the poor-rate, obey God and His messenger. Verily, verily God intends to keep off from you (every kind of) uncleanness O, you the people of the House, and purify you (with) a through purification.
>
> Qurʾān 33:33

Hence, the household of the Prophet were those who were closest to him and the most pure, providing an example for Muslims to follow and obey. The Shīʿa *imām*s, leaders of the community, were considered to possess special characteristics such as purity and moral and ethical infallibility, or *ʿiṣma*.

Shīʿa have not been a homogeneous group. During a short period in the early history of Shīʿa, between 660 and 870, a dozen conflicting factions formed, all of which laid claim to the correct interpretation within Shīʿa. The differences concerned, for example, the order of succession among Muḥammad's descendants and the question of which of the descendants should be regarded as the rightful Shīʿa *imām*s (Aqajari 2002: 20).

One example is the Zaydīs, who believed that any descendant of the first *imām* ʿAlī could become *imām*. They claimed that Zayd ibn ʿAlī (695–740), who was son of the fourth Shīʿa *imām* ʿAlī Zayn al-ʿAbedin (658–712) should be regarded as the fifth Shīʿa *imām*. This was in contrast to the majority of Shīʿa Muslims who believed that Muḥammad al-Bāqir (676–736), an elder son of ʿAlī Zayn al-ʿAbedin, was the fifth *imām*. The Zaydīs were against the Umayyad and ʿAbbāsid caliphates and founded the first Shīʿa dynasty in northern Persia. The Būyid dynasty who controlled a major part of ʿAbbāsid territory were also Zaydīs. The contemporary Ḥuthi Shīʿa minority in northern Yemen are also Zaydīs, and their ancestors founded a dynasty in Yemen in the ninth century that lasted until the 1960s (Esposito 2011: 48–49).

Another example is the Ismāʿīlīs, who in the eighth century decided to contest who was to succeed the Shīʿa *imām* Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq. According to the Ismāʿīlīs, his son Ismāʿīl was to succeed him. He is also the one who, according to Ismāʿīlite belief, will return to save the world. The Twelvers, on the other hand, believed that the *imām* Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq should be succeeded by another one of his sons, the one the Twelvers regard as their seventh *imām*, Mūsā al-Kāẓim (745–799) (Fazlhashemi 2011: 29), The Ismāʿīlīs started their activities as a revolutionary and missionary movement who wanted to spread their esoteric knowledge of Qurʾān to other Muslims. They were prepared to use violence in this regard. Security forces from both the ʿAbbāsid Caliphate

and Seljuq Sultanate hunted them, forcing them to operate in secret. Ismā'īlīs took power in several parts in the Muslim world, but the two most famous of them were the Faṭimid Caliphate in Egypt (969–1171) and a group who broke away from the Faṭimids in 1094 and had its headquarters at Mount Alamūt in northern Persia. The most famous name from this group was Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ (1050–1124) who ordered assassinations against 'Abbāsid and Seljuq officials (Esposito 2011: 49–51).

This chapter focuses on the largest group within Shī'a: The Imāmiyya, or the Twelvers. According to Imāmiyya Shī'a the leadership of the Muslim community after Muḥammad should start with his relative 'Alī and the last Shī'a *imām* was Muḥammad ibn Ḥasan (b. 868), known as al-Mahdī, the 'Hidden Imām' (Esposito 2011: 48). They recognise twelve *imām*s in total who are believed to have distinguished themselves from other people by possessing a divine light that gave them knowledge about sacred mysteries. This light gave the Twelve Imāms immunity from sin, and for that reason, they should be the obvious leaders of the Muslim community. Their leadership, it is believed, would give them the opportunity to transfer divine knowledge to the people (Lambton 1981: 220).

Perhaps the most controversial theological feature of Imāmiyya Shī'a is the belief in the 'Hidden Imām' al-Mahdī who is considered to have been in occultation since the 900s. According to Imāmiyya Shī'a, he will emerge from hiding to defeat evil and save the world. In this mission, he is accompanied by other prophets such as Jesus. An even more controversial view within Imāmiyya Shī'a's eschatological beliefs is the notion of *raj'a*, the resurrection of a number of central historical figures. The resurrection, includes both good and evil people who will take part in a final battle, in which forces of evil will be vanquished once for all before the final apocalypse, predicted in the Qur'ān. From the Sunnī side, and for some Imāmiyya Shī'a clergies, these beliefs have been heavily criticised for lack of support from the Qur'ān and the prophetic tradition. Critics regard these beliefs as heretical and superstitious and blame the infiltration of Jewish sources from converts for the appearance of such "un-Islamic" beliefs (see for example the Imāmiyya Shī'a clergy Shari'at Sangelaji's [1891–1944] book *Eslam va rij'at*, published by his disciple Farid Tonkaboni).

The Shī'as in general, and Imāmiyya Shī'as in particular, have historically found themselves in the minority and on the losing end of broader power struggles in the early centuries of Islam. These struggles were the foundation for the schism that arose between the two main branches of Islam, the Sunnī and Shī'as. The most important controversy concerned the foundation for the legitimacy of secular power and leadership in the community (Kadivar 2000: 12). During the fourteen hundred years that have elapsed since then, the chasm

between them has widened to include theological, legal, philosophical, cultural, social, and not least political controversies (Fazlhashemi 2011: 22).

This chapter has a chronological structure and takes a largely historical approach to present the development of Imāmiyya Shīʿa. Relevant primary sources and scholarly works help to trace the process of the development and formation of Shīʿa political ideas in the course of history, with a particular focus on Persia/Iran under the Ṣafavid Dynasty (1501–1736) and in the modern era, where Shīʿa has seen its most fervent periods of support and evolution.

2   Succession and Leadership: The Emergence of Imāmiyya Shīʿa

Shīʿa Islam emerges from the first major schism within the religion founded by the prophet Muḥammad. As Muḥammad appointed no heir before his death, the question of succession caused quickly became one of great political import, causing the division of the Sunnī and Shīʿa factions. It remains the topic of debate today. Iraqi Imāmiyya Shīʿa legal scholar Moḥammad Baqer al-Ṣadr (1935–1980) writes that the prophet Muḥammad had to choose among three possibilities regarding succession before his death. One was not to bother appointing a successor, another was to persuade his closest followers to elect a successor after deliberation, and the third option was that he himself should nominate his successor. Al-Ṣadr rejects the first two alternatives: that the prophet would not appoint his own successor could be interpreted to mean that he did not care about what would happen to the young Muslim community after his death. This is not consistent with the great concern he displayed for the welfare of the community. Nor was the second alternative particularly appealing to the prophet, in al-Ṣadr's view, since the tradition of deliberative councils was far too risky in view of the heterogeneous character of the Muslim community. It was the prophet himself who functioned as a unifying factor for the early Muslim community, within which there were significant differences. This circumstance would increase the risk of division and would not benefit his community.

Al-Ṣadr believes that the prophet, from a logical point of view, ought to have chosen the last alternative to ensure that the leadership of his community would be in safe hands after him. Al-Ṣadr thinks that the choice of ʿAlī was not primarily due to the close family relationship of the two men. He does not disregard the fact that this would let the leadership stay within Muḥammad's own family, but he asserts that ʿAlī was by far the best choice. ʿAlī had very good and close relations with Muḥammad. He had followed Muḥammad since his childhood and was among the first to convert to Islam. Muḥammad had followed

'Alī's development closely from his early years and had been a part of it. 'Alī had thus been brought up in Muḥammad's "school" since he was a child, but he was also, according to the Shī'a view, the one who was most familiar, after the Prophet himself, with religious knowledge. Here his close relationship to the Prophet played a crucial part. 'Alī's young age also meant that, unlike many of the older followers, he was not involved in conflicts arising from older loyalties to tribes and clans or from the social, economic, and political positions, they had before they converted to Islam. According to al-Ṣadr, then, the choice of 'Alī was something that guaranteed the continuity of secular and religious leadership in the Muslim community (al-Sadr 2002: 28–88).

In the Shī'a view, there was no doubt that following the death of the Prophet Muhammad leadership should go to his descendants, a concept that they argue found support in the Qur'ān and the principle of *wilāya* or leadership. Their stance was that if *wilāya* ended up outside Muḥammad's lineage, the leadership of Muslims would be in the hands of people who lacked divine protection, *'iṣma*. This protection, in the Shī'a view, was reserved solely for Muḥammad's lineage. Without this protection, there was a risk of innovations and deviations that conflicted with the fundamental principles of Islam.

It took over two decades before 'Alī became the fourth caliph after Muḥammad, although not in his capacity as a Shī'a *imām* but as the person chosen by the Muslim people to lead the community. His time in power was very short, however, just over four years. He was murdered in a political attack by a group of religious extremists who accused him of having broken the laws of Islam, and in certain respects not having lived up to its ideals. Shortly after this event, the first caliphate dynasty was founded, the Umayyads (661–750), who were then succeeded by the new caliphate dynasty of the 'Abbāsids (750–1258). Both dynasties belonged to the Sunnī branch of Islam (Fazlhashemi 2011: 21).

'Alī's descendants never succeeded in regaining power. They were outmaneuvered and suffered severe losses. During the time of the Twelve Shī'a Imāms (633–874) the repression of the Shī'a became harsher. A couple of these *imām*s took part in armed actions against Sunnī rulers and were killed on the battlefield or poisoned on the orders of Umayyad leaders. The Battle of Karbalā' in 680, when the third Shī'a *imām*, Ḥusayn, Muḥammad's grandson, and his nearest circle were massacred by a superior Sunnī army, was the last armed resistance put up by the Shī'a *imām*s. After the Battle of Karbalā', which has left deep traces in Shī'a folk memory, the Shī'a Imāms continued their resistance against the Umayyad and later the 'Abbāsid caliphs without armed actions (Fazlhashemi 2011: 21–22). The reason for the Shī'a *imām*s' refusal to recognise the Umayyad and 'Abbāsid rulers was that they wanted to maintain

the principle of *wilāya*, or leadership, under their system of *imāms* who could be traced back to the Prophet.

The repression of the Shī'a Imāms was so severe during the period from the 680s to the 880s that they concentrated on developing Shī'a theology in order to preserve Shī'a Islam as a religious tradition. The best known of these *imām*s who helped to shape Shī'a theology was the sixth *imām*, Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (705–765). The theology of the Twelve Imāms consequently bears his name and is also called Ja'farite theology. Despite this, the Shī'a Imāms did not escape persecution by the Sunnī rulers. Several of them died in prison or were poisoned in their homes. The last of these *imām*s, Muḥammad ibn Ḥasan (born 868), known under the name al-Mahdī, went underground as a young man to evade the patrols of the 'Abbāsid caliphate, and communicated with his followers by proxy (Fazlhashemi 2011: 22).

After 940 and the Imāmiyya Shī'as' idea of the twelfth *imām* living in hiding, the question arose of who would carry on this heritage. It was obvious that no one could replace either the Prophet or the Twelve Imāms, but now the idea was formed that legal scholars should fill the vacuum that had arisen during the long absence. There was no disagreement about the need for these jurists, but soon differences of opinion were heard about their authority. This concerned, above all, the issue of whether they should solely function as stewards of the tradition or could act independently in the interpretation of the religion's founding documents, but also how far they could go and whether it was permissible to use reason when interpreting religious texts and statements by the Prophet and the Twelve Imāms (Lambton 1981: 243–63).

The division among the Shī'a, however, was not limited to disputes about the order of succession among Muḥammad's descendants. Within the Imāmiyya Shī'a, there was soon a schism that would be of great significance for the outlook on secular power. Once again, this division concerned the relationship between faith/revelation and reason. The group that wanted to give priority to faith thought that the most important task was to seek guidance in revelation and in the statements of Shī'a *imām*s. According to this view, the revelation communicated through the Prophet and his statements and through the Shī'a *imām*s' statements are the only sources that Shī'a Muslims need when they seek answers to their questions. All they have to do is to navigate correctly among the countless existing statements and guidelines. This group came to be called the Akhbarids. Against this stance were those who thought that although the revelation and the *imām*s' statements should be used, they should simultaneously be interpreted by legal scholars on the basis of the tradition of *ijtihād*. This group was called Uṣulids. The conflict between these two

tendencies would develop into a struggle between faith and reason (Fazlhashemi 2011: 30).

The Twelve Imāms, their lives, theological beliefs, and political stances, have shaped Imāmiyya Shī'a orthodoxy and orthopraxy, its theology, and its outlook on secular power. Along with themes of persecution and oppression, and the important of history and remembrance, the *imāmate* is one of the key features of 'Twelver' Shī'a Islam.

3 Key Themes in Imāmiyya Shī'a

3.1 *The Twelve Imāms*

The concept of heritage is clearly central to the development of Shī'a, its own schisms, and to the beliefs of Imāmiyya Shī'a. The centrality of the role of the twelve Shī'a *imām*s in Imāmiyya Shī'a was due to their links with the Prophet, and their ability to authentically carry on his tradition. From the time of the Twelve Shī'a Imāms (633–874 CE) those who are thought to have been of the greatest significance for empowering the movement are the first *imām* 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (600–661 CE), his sons Ḥasan (624–669 CE) and Ḥusayn (626–680 CE), and the last *imām*, Muḥammad ibn Ḥasan, al-Mahdī (Fazlhashemi 2011: 22).

A consideration of the actions of the Twelve Imāms during the period 657–940 shows an important dividing line between the first three *imām*s and the others. The first three *imām*s—'Alī, Ḥasan, and Ḥusayn—acted as both secular and religious leaders. They did not hesitate to take part in armed conflicts even if it meant certain death for themselves and the people closest to them. The murder of the third *imām*, Ḥusayn, in 680 is an example of this. Other *imām*s, however, seem to have had different priorities. They made no great effort to assume secular power. They preferred to act as the foremost religious authorities of their time. It was also during their time that Shī'a theology took shape. Starting with the fifth and sixth *imām*s—Muḥammad al-Bāqir (676–736 CE) and Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (705–765 CE)—this shift became even more obvious. The Shī'a *imām*s acted more in their capacity as prominent religious than secular leaders. What distinguished them from other religious authorities was their close family ties to the Prophet, since they were his direct descendants (Modarresi Ṭabaṭaba'i 2007: 38–39). Secular and political responsibility was transferred to a messianic figure who would restore order and give power back to the Shī'a *imām*s. This saviour, the *Qā'im*, would come forth from the group of Shī'a *imām*s, but simultaneously several of these *imām*s declared that they

were not the expected saviours. Among other things, the fifth and sixth *imām*s emphasised this.

The situation changed somewhat under the seventh *imām*, Mūsā al-Kāẓim (745–799), who breathed new life into the belief in the coming saviour. What was new for the seventh *imām* was that he introduced an extensive system of representatives all over the Islamic realm. These were in close contact with the *imām* and collected religious taxes. The newly organised network of representatives and the economic opportunities that were opened with the centrally collected religious taxes aroused new hope of the expected saviour among Imāmiyya Shī'as. Another relevant factor is that the seventh *imām* had adopted a position that differed partly from that of his immediate predecessor. He levelled open criticism at the caliphate in Baghdad, and his opposition inspired some Shī'a groups to revolt against the caliphate. The development also provoked fears in the 'Abbāsid caliphate and the then-caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (763–809), who feared new uprising among Imāmiyya Shī'a followers. He imprisoned Mūsā and then had him murdered in captivity (Modarresi Ṭabaṭaba'i 2007: 40–41).

The murder of the seventh *imām* once again crushed new hopes of the saviour who would liberate the Shī'a from 'Abbāsid repression. These hopes were revived when the new 'Abbāsid caliph Ma'mun appointed the eighth Shī'a *imām*, 'Alī al-Riḍā (763–818), as his crown prince. The move by the 'Abbāsid caliph proved to be a political manoeuvre to gain control over the troubled situation. When things calmed down he had al-Riḍā poisoned. The belief in the saviour lay dormant until the 870s when the twelfth and last *imām* began his life in hiding. The ninth and tenth *imām*s were both minors when they succeeded to the office, and the eleventh *imām* spent most of his life under virtual house arrest where his freedom of action was limited by the 'Abbāsid caliph. A debate that flared among the Imāmiyya Shī'a in connection with the ninth and tenth *imām*s concerned whether minors—both became *imām*s at the age of seven or eight because their fathers had been murdered—had sufficient religious knowledge to take office as *imām* or the secular leadership qualities required to save the Shī'a community. These circumstances meant that the secular role of the *imām*s had to take a back seat to other issues (Modarresi Ṭabaṭaba'i 2007: 42–43).

Already in the time of the Shī'a *imām*s, we can see that their actions with regard to secular power and the relationship between religious and secular leadership was linked to prevailing social and political circumstances. While some people could even take up arms to defend their right to secular power, others chose solely to assert this right, without otherwise making any great

efforts to achieve it. They gave priority to other questions, which included religious concerns and areas to do with social care.

A shared view among Imāmiyya Shīʿa legal scholars has been that during the absence of the twelfth *imām*, the secular power belongs, *de jure*, to the Hidden Imām, according to Shīʿa law, but *de facto*, in reality, it is in the hands of others. The Hidden Imām was in occultation, and even if power did fall to him, he was not available to assume this rule. From this point of view, the secular rulers were illegitimate, but there was no real substitute for them. Shīʿa legal scholars were obliged to relate to the secular rulers who had the real power. They chose completely different approaches, however. Some stayed at a safe distance from secular power, maintaining a quietist stance. They refrained from any involvement in secular power and indulged in utopian visions of the ideal society that the Hidden Imām would create on his return. The most important issue for this group was to preserve Shīʿa Islam. The Hidden Imām himself would look after the question of secular power when he found the time ripe.

Against this passive attitude, there was an activist stance that saw it as the task of legal scholars to try to hasten the return of the Hidden Imām. This would be done by combating the illegitimate rulers and trying to overthrow their regime. One example was the distinguished Imāmiyya Shīʿa scholar Naṣir al-Din Tusi (1201–1274), who cooperated with Mongol rulers when they attacked the ʿAbbāsid Caliphate. He saw the Mongols as a means of overthrowing the hated Sunnī supremacy (Lambton 1981: 224).

Another example was the Imāmiyya Shīʿa scholar Shaykh Muḥammad al-Mufid (d. 1022) who believed that those who assigned to the office of illegitimate worldly rulers had in fact received these positions by the Hidden Imām. They should use their offices to counteract offences and sinful acts (Bagdadi and Noʾman 1995: 120–121). A further example was the distinguished scholar Sayyid Murtada (978–1058), who was the great-grandson of the seventh Shīʿa *imām* Mūsā al-Kāẓim. He made a distinction between evil and fair rulers. He meant that the scholars should accept positions and offices offered by fair rulers. Under these circumstances, participation in the political life was a prerequisite for being able to enforce Shīʿa order in the worldly rule (Sayyid Murtada 1987: 96–98).

In between these opposing attitudes were those who wanted to make the best of the situation and adopted a pragmatic and realistic stance by creating forms for dealings between the Imāmiyya Shīʿa legal scholars and the secular rulers. The differing attitudes of the Imāmiyya Shīʿa legal scholars on this issue are based in part on the fact that they lived in different historical, economic, social, and political conditions. It also happened that legal scholars living in

the same period and in similar social and political structures adopted diametrically opposite positions. One explanation for this was that they proceeded from different theological interpretive traditions.

3.2   *Persecution and Oppression*

Imāmiyya Shīʿa Muslims do not regard themselves as a minority or a sect that is in opposition to the majority within Islam in the matter of its religious foundations, the Qurʾān, or the prophet's tradition, *sunna*. Nor do they perceive themselves as an ethnic or political group seeking to establish a new religious tendency to split the Muslim community and thus break up the Muslim unity. They also dismiss all allegations that come from some Sunnī, mostly Salafis and Wahhābīs, claiming that it was Jews—a Jewish man named Ibn Saba who had converted to Islam and lived during the third caliph Othman's era—or Persians, more specifically the Shīʿa dynasties Būyids (934–1065) and Ṣafavids (1501–1736), who were political rivals to Sunnī Caliphates and who invented Shīʿa to harm Islam from within (Ṭabaṭabaʾi 2003: 18–19).

The Imāmiyya Shīʿa Muslims prefer to view themselves as a group within the Muslim community whose history started the same day as the Prophet's death. They reacted to the danger that would shut out the descendants of Prophet from the leadership of the young Muslim community. The descendants of the Prophet had the specific task of protecting Islam's principles and Islamic laws that had their origin in the revelation that God had sent to the Prophet. They reacted also, against what they perceived as deviations from the Qurʾān and the prophet's tradition of which representatives of Sunnī Islam were guilty. According to this view, then, Imāmiyya Shīʿa arose as a defence of Islam's fundamental principles (Ṭabaṭabaʾi 2003: 21–22).

Imāmiyya Shīʿa Muslims tend to highlight the development after Muḥammad's death, when the Muslim rulers, according to the Imāmiyya Shīʿa view, made major deviations from Islamic laws. They also accused the Sunnī rulers of dictatorial ways, corruption, immorality, and love of luxury. They accused the Sunnī rulers of abandoning basic principles of Islam and conventions that were founded by the Prophet during his time. One example was the fair distribution of public funds among all Muslims. They began to favour certain groups of Muslims over others, an act that was in conflict with egalitarian principles of Islam and led to major class divisions between Muslims. They also accused the Umayyad and ʿAbbāsid caliphs of having acquired Byzantine and Persian court traditions that were not Islamic and deviated from the path of the Prophet (Ṭabaṭabaʾi 2003: 23–24, 26–27).

During the first century after the Prophet Muḥammad's death, Imāmiyya Shīʿa was an oppositional movement opposed to the secular order. Otherwise

they did not differ much from other Muslims. It was only from the mid-eighth century that Shī'a theology and *sharī'a* law began to take shape, in that this was when Shī'a theologians entered the debate and marked their positions in relation to Sunnī law schools. It was under the fifth and sixth Shī'a *imām*s that Shī'a theology developed (Modarresi Ṭabaṭaba'i 2007: 30–31).

Sunnīs regarded the Shī'a Muslims as *rāfiḍī* (rejectors/rejectionists, or apostates). During certain periods in the history of Islam, this led to cruel persecution of Shī'a. They were viewed as outlaws whose lives should not be spared and whose property could be confiscated (Ṭabaṭaba'i 2003: 28). The harshest persecutions took place during the first three centuries of Islam's history. Sunnīs accused Shī'a as a kind of opposition who rejected their attempts to hold together the religious institution and the state by reconciling religious theory and historical precedent (Lambton 1981: 223). With the formation of the Shī'a (but not Imāmiyaa) Fāṭimid Caliphate (909–1171) in Egypt and the Būyid State (934–1055) in Persia, different Shī'a groups found protection. The great breakthrough for Imāmiyya Shī'a came when the Ṣafavids (1501–1736) seized power in Persia and Shī'a became a state religion, thus enjoying its greatest upswing in support.

Another cause of the marginalisation of the Imāmiyya Shī'a was the dismissal of the rationalist exegetic tradition of Islamic theology favoured by Shī'a Islam. In Sunnī Islam, the Mu'tazilites had promoted this tradition but this was efficiently subdued by the Ash'arites who restricted the influence of rationalism (Ṭabaṭaba'i 2003: 31–33). The Imāmiyya Shī'a theologian and philosopher Moḥammad Ḥussein Ṭabaṭaba'i (1892–1981) blames the growing intellectual stagnation in Islamic civilisation on the exclusion of the Imāmiyya Shī'a. According to Ṭabaṭaba'i this eliminated critical thinking and left room for orthodoxy, blind faith, dogmatism, and fanaticism (Ṭabaṭaba'i 2003: 35–37).

The persecutions of the Imāmiyya Shī'a Muslims by the 'Abbāsid caliphate intensified to such a degree that the twelfth Shī'a *imām* chose to go underground to be able to continue to lead the Imāmiyya Shī'a Muslims. This period, which began in 874 and lasted until 940, is called the 'lesser occultation', *Ghayba al-ṣughra*. During this period the *imām* maintained contact with the Imāmiyya Shī'a Muslims through four agents he had personally appointed. This period ended in 940, however, when the last agent died, and this marked the start of the 'long occultation', *Ghayba al-kubra*, a time when the twelfth Shī'a *imām* continued to exercise his leadership of the Shī'a through a life in hiding and without any agents. He is still believed to be hiding today and will eventually return like a messianic figure to deliver the world from all evil and create a just world (Sachedina 1988: 170).

3.3   *History and Rememberance*

A recurrent feature of Imāmiyya Shīʿa is the feedback loop within the history of
Shīʿa, bolstered by the ritual of remembering one's history. Popular Imāmiyya
Shīʿa religiosity is based on a large and powerful community of tears. It builds
on the grief for the murdered *imām*s, especially the third *imām* Ḥusayn, on
the fear of historical persecutions, and on the hope of the redeemer al-Mahdī.
This community demands a type of engagement that cannot be ques-
tioned and that rests on a natural, original, and unconditional membership
(Fazlhashemi 2011: 33). Shīʿa history serves to preserve the hardships of the past
as well as informing the present and the future, and a cyclical effect is created
through the parallels that arise between historical events and the collective or
social memory.

   It is always interesting to study why historical events have been constructed
and revived in the way they have. The use of history has had an important func-
tion in the construction of national identities, and religious identities as well.
The most important function has been existential in character. The existential
use of history in Shīʿa has been to provide a foundation for remembering, since
people need to remember, but also to be able to set the history of the Shīʿa
in a larger context of oppression and righteousness and to feel an affinity to
other people who profess the same beliefs. Alongside this sense of solidarity,
there are also moral and ideological aspects which mean that history is used to
achieve completely new aims (Fazlhashemi 2011: 34).

   A central concern in the history of Imāmiyya Shīʿa has been to create his-
torical "places of memory" of both physical and spiritual character. It is a
question of events, dates, battles, graves, and other things that arouse strong
emotional associations in Shīʿa Muslims. Some of the most important places
for the Imāmiyya Shīʿa are the places where the Shīʿa *imām*s are buried. They
are located in cities like Najaf, Karbalāʾ, Sāmarrāʾ and Al-Kāẓimayn in Iraq,
Medina in Saudi Arabia, and Mashhad in Iran. One of the most visited places
is the shrine of the third Shīʿa *imām* Ḥusayn who was massacred together with
seventy of his children, relatives, and followers by a huge Umayyad army in an
unequal battle in 680 in Karbalāʾ. Shīʿa Muslims who visit these places, graves,
or shrines participate in mourning ceremonies, specific prayers and rituals.
These places of memory belong to a context that is recognised by individuals
or a collective that has been welded together by shared Imāmiyya Shīʿa beliefs.
These places of memory awaken a sense of "restorative" nostalgia that is used to
recreate a specific state that either existed in the past or never had a chance to
be realised (Fazlhashemi 2011: 35). Four Shīʿa *imām*s who are buried in Medina
at the graveyard of Baqīʿ al-Gharqad are still not allowed to have shrines due to
the dominant Wahhābī tradition of that region, a continuing reminder of the
compromised status of Shīʿa in the wider Islamic world.

4   Imāmiyya Shī'a in the Ṣafavid Dynasty

The thoughts of the Imāmiyya Shī'a legal scholars about secular government underwent a drastic change in the sixteenth century. They started to collaborate with the Ṣafavids who had seized power in Persia (1501–1736). The Ṣafavids proclaimed Imāmiyya Shī'a as the state religion and gave the Imāmiyya Shī'a legal scholars a free hand to spread Imāmiyya Shī'a in their kingdom. In return they demanded that the scholars bless their political status and thereby grant them religious legitimacy, which was an important ground for political legitimacy in pre-modern times. The collaboration of the Imāmiyya Shī'a legal scholars with the Ṣafavid kings can be compared to a forced marriage in which the two parties are not very fond of each other, but have to be married since they are mutually dependent. The Ṣafavid kings relied on the blessing of the legal scholars because this could give religious legitimacy to their kingly power. The legal scholars were dependent on the royal house, which could help them to consolidate their position by strengthening their institutions and extending their jurisdiction.

But there were theological obstacles to the collaboration of the legal scholars with the royal house. All power and glory, according to Imāmiyya Shī'a theology, was supposed to be in the hands of the scholars while the Shī'a Muslims awaited the return of the occulted *imām* al-Mahdī. The collaboration of the scholars with the royal Ṣafavid house meant that they blessed kings who were regarded by definition as being illegitimate in strict religious and theological terms (Fazlhashemi 2011: 35–48).

For the legal scholars there were weighty reasons for overlooking their own theological misgivings. This was the first time a royal power of the dignity of the Ṣafavids extended a hand of cooperation to the Imāmiyya Shī'a scholars and also declared themselves willing to proclaim Imāmiyya Shī'a as the state religion. It was thus a very tempting offer. The first Imāmiyya Shī'a scholars who accepted the invitation viewed it as a golden opportunity for them to escape from their hitherto vulnerable position as a persecuted minority. They also saw great possibilities to use the support of the Ṣafavid kings to promote the mission of Shī'a Islam in a larger, cohesive kingdom. The willingness of the Shī'a leaders to enter this alliance, however, required new theological thinking to open the way for a new political doctrine.

4.1   *Rationalist Theology*

One of those who helped to develop an exchange of favours with the Ṣafavid kings was the Imāmiyya Shī'a legal scholar Karakī (1464–1534). His most important action, apart from granting the Ṣafavids their longed-for religious legitimacy, was the compilation of *Jami' al-maqṣaid*, a book of legal exegesis. The

work served several purposes. It functioned as a source for interpreting the law during the Ṣafavid era, thereby creating clear judicial structures. It set a Shīʿa stamp on the judicial tradition and counteracted the arbitrary behaviour of the autocratic kings (Fazlhashemi 2016: 134). The Ṣafavid king Ṭahmasp I (1514–1576) declared in a letter that he regarded Karakī as the representative of the twelfth Shīʿa *imām* and himself as Karakī's representative (Khonsari 1981, vol. 4: 362–363).

It is interesting to note that Karakī, despite his close collaboration with the Ṣafavid kings, considered them illegitimate, even though he blessed their power and their right to collect tax from their subjects. One may ask how he could reconcile these two oppositional stances (Khonsari 1981, vol. 4: 76). Karakī maintained that it was forbidden to assist evil and repressive rulers: if it turns out that the collaboration results in an evil ruler consolidating his position, then one is guilty of an impermissible act, in his opinion. But if one can ensure that the cooperation makes it possible to achieve good things in society, there is nothing to prevent cooperation with the king. According to Karakī, through such collaboration one could fulfil the Qurʾānic principle of imposing the admissible and prohibiting the unlawful—*amr bi al-maʿroof wa nahj ʿan al-munkar*. The only thing to be wary of was complicity in sin, oppression, and murder (Karaki 1998: 44).

From this perspective, collaboration with illegitimate secular rulers was not intrinsically evil. The crucial point was the purpose of the collaboration, and a secondary consideration was the circumstances that enabled collaboration. A legal scholar who enters an alliance with an unrightful king with the aim of reforming and rectifying things—of doing *ʾiṣlāḥ* (reforming)—does so with good intent. A legal scholar should be regarded as the representative of the occulted Shīʿa *imām*, al-Mahdī, and not as the king's man or someone obeying the king's orders. It is the occulted *imām* who is the lawful ruler, and it is he who appoints the legal scholar as his agent (Karaki 1998: 489–490). The elevation of the legal scholars to the position as representatives of the occulted *imām* meant that their powers were not confined to the religious sphere. Like the occulted *imām*'s own jurisdiction, theirs would also comprise all spheres of society (Karaki n.d.: 142).

4.2   *Religious Legitimacy*

The powerful position of the Ṣafavids was due to their own military strength, yet religious blessing was still deemed necessary for secular rulers during this historical period. Religious legitimacy would raise the Ṣafavids to the same level as their Ottoman rivals, a fact of which Imāmiyya Shīʿa legal scholars were well aware. Refusing to give the Ṣafavids the coveted religious blessing was an

option, but it would mean gambling away their historical opportunity to exert influence in the corridors of power. This was the factor that made a group of senior Shīʿa scholars choose to collaborate with the Ṣafavid kings.

To begin with, the Imāmiyya Shīʿa scholars viewed their task from an ethical perspective. Their duty was to urge the king to reform the realm in accordance with Islamic ethics. They cited support for their action in concepts such as *ʾiṣlāḥ*, putting things right, in the Qurʾān (11:88, 7:85). Acting in accordance with the concept of *ʾiṣlāḥ* proved to be something that could vary depending on prevailing circumstances. In times when the king was strong and the manoeuvring space of the legal scholars was limited, the latter interpreted *ʾiṣlāḥ* to mean that they should provide the king with an ethical frame of reference. There was no consensus among legal scholars about how to legitimise collaboration with the Ṣafavid kings. The jurist Mollā Moḥammad Bāqer Majlesi (d. 1699) chose to attribute the legitimacy of the Ṣafavid kings to their alleged kinship with the Shīʿa *imām*s and ultimately with the Prophet himself. This basis for legitimacy meant, according to Majlesi, that there were important obligations for the Ṣafavid kings. They were supposed to follow in the footsteps of the Shīʿa *imām*s and the Prophet, to live an orthodox life, and act righteously. Majlesi asserted that God had chosen to give royal power to the Ṣafavid kings so that the Shīʿa Muslim subjects could live in security in the kingdom of the Ṣafavids (manuscript collection of the Iranian Parliamentary Library, no. 1, collection no. 2721).

Majlesi's legitimisation of Ṣafavid power can be regarded as a pragmatic solution attempting to adapt the fundamental Shīʿa tradition of political ideas to prevailing conditions. It can simultaneously be seen as a very smart solution to the question of establishing a secular power that could win the blessing of legal scholars during the absence of the twelfth *imām*. Majlesi enjoined the king to satisfy a series of criteria based on the Shīʿa religious tradition. He did not go so far, however, as to raise the Ṣafavid kings to the level of the Hidden Imām or to see them as his deputies. The most important reason for this was that the Ṣafavid kings, despite all their services to Shīʿa Islam and their alleged kinship with the Prophet's descendants, could not be classed as free of sin, or *maʿṣum*. This was reserved solely for the Twelve Imāms. Majlesi's support for the Ṣafavids was however founded on his genuine religious conviction that the era of the Ṣafavids was a preliminary stage in the return of the Hidden Imām al-Mahdī (Majlesi 1993: 243). The Imāmiyya Shīʿa legal scholar Shaykh Baha'i (1547–1621) legitimised the power of King ʿAbbās I (1571–1629) for a different and more practical reason: the legitimacy was valid as long as the king, in his public actions, followed the principle of justice and continued to defend Twelver Shīʿa Islam (Lakzai 2007: 290).

Since Shaykh Bahai did not elevate the Ṣafavid kings to the level of the Shī'a *imām*s, obedience to them was not equated with obedience to God and crimes against them could not be regarded as crimes against God. The legal scholar Sabzevari (1599–1672) listed the properties a king must have if he is to earn religious legitimacy in a Shī'a kingdom. These properties include probity, following the tradition of the Hidden Imām, protecting Shī'a Muslims from dangers and infidels, protecting Shī'a, and so on (Sabzevari 2004: 64). By enumerating the properties of a Shī'a king and the demands made of him, the legal scholars were released from the duty of dealing with this task themselves (Lakzai 1988: 146).

4.3   *Institutionalisation and Changing Roles*

The Ṣafavid kings knew nothing about Imāmiyya Shī'a theology. The Imāmiyya Shī'a legal scholars had unrestricted jurisdiction over religious and judicial matters. To ensure his power over the religious institutions, it was the king who appointed the leaders of the religious institutions. These were selected with great care from among those who were most loyal to the crown. This could in turn create disruptive disputes between parts of the ordinary religious community and the royal house (Lambton 1981: 266–267). The Ṣafavids exercised rigorous supervision over the Imāmiyya Shī'a religious institutions. The king appointed, for example, the Imāmiyya Shī'a legal scholar who acted as head of all Imāmiyya Shī'a legal scholars. This man, who was called Molla Bashi in the Ṣafavid era, was the highest religious authority and the link between the king and the legal scholars. The royal house also appointed another administrative leader designated as *ṣadr*. The duties of the *ṣadr* included appointing religious judges, those who were to take charge religious endowments, appointing prayer leaders, leaders of religious schools and mosques, and various other religious offices (Lambton 1981: 268).

By leaving such religious matters to an official religious leader appointed by the Ṣafavid court, the king could affect development and supervise the various religious activities (Jafarian 2000: vol. 1, 196–198). The office of *ṣadr* filled yet another important function that concerned the dissemination of Imāmiyya Shī'a. The Ṣafavids proclaimed Imāmiyya Shī'a as the state religion in a kingdom where the majority were Sunnī Muslims and they thus had the duty of ensuring that people in the realm of the Ṣafavids would convert to Imāmiyya Shī'a (Lambton 1981: 268). Yet another office of great significance in the Ṣafavid era was Shaykh al-Islām, chief among jurists, the representative of the Hidden Imām, whom all Shī'a Muslims were duty-bound to obey and whose tasks included crowning the king. At the same time, it was the king who chose the man who would bear the title Shaykh al-Islām (Samia 1999: 3).

When the Ṣafavids fell from power in 1736, the situation of the Imāmiyya Shīʿa legal scholars changed dramatically. It did not just mean that a Shīʿa dynasty was overthrown and that the Imāmiyya Shīʿa legal scholars lost the support of the crown, the Imāmiyya Shīʿa legal scholars were also subjected to severe reprisals for having given their blessing to the Ṣafavid kingdom and for their participation in the Ṣafavids' policy of consolidating Imāmiyya Shīʿa in their kingdom. The new rulers regarded the Imāmiyya Shīʿa legal scholars as a religious and political obstacle that had to be removed. The fall of the Ṣafavids was accompanied by political unrest, war, famine, and disease, and a share of the Shīʿa people were taken away to be sold into slavery. The population in the former kingdom of the Ṣafavids was reduced by about one tenth (Ravandi 1978: 436).

The Ṣafavids set their stamp on the continued development in what remained of their kingdom. The Imāmiyya Shīʿa legal scholars and their institutions managed to survive the fall of the Ṣafavids and would play an important part in social and political development in following years. The most obvious impact was their influence on political developments in Persia/Iran. This intensified from the second half of the nineteenth century in connection with the constitutional revolution in Iran in 1906, and peaking with the revolution of 1979 when the legal scholars ended the previously mentioned parallel form of government and took over secular power.

5   Modern Iran: Political Activism on the Advance

The attitude of the Imāmiyya Shīʿa scholars to political matters changed during the nineteenth century, when more and more scriptural scholars were drawn into the discussions about the intellectual tradition of constitutionalism and the nascent constitutional movement that was sweeping over several Muslim countries, especially in the Imāmiyya Shīʿa-dominated Persia. It was thus a consequence of the close contacts of Imāmiyya Shīʿa scholars with European ideas about constitutional government that scholars were increasingly involved in the political debate and new political theories and doctrines were elaborated. Among the issues discussed was the adoption of a constitution, the abolition of despotism, the introduction of parliamentarism, holding general elections, electing or becoming a representative for a constituency/guild/estate, separating executive, legislative, and judicial powers, passing laws to guarantee basic civil rights and freedoms without regard for religious affiliation, birth, or social status, and determining the right of citizens to control political power (Kadivar 1999: 9–12, 19–21).

The reactions of legal scholars to these issues can be roughly divided into two categories. One proceeded from a quietist attitude, advising legal scholars not to intervene in secular matters; this was a sphere that also had to be regarded as reserved for the Hidden Imām. The other attitude broke with the traditional view and recommended a model according to which legal scholars should take an active part in a transition to a constitutional form of government under the supervision of the highest legal Imāmiyya Shīʿa scholars. Iranian scholar and jurist Ayatollah Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Nāʾīnī (1860–1936) advocated this model, believing that legal scholars could sit in parliament and ensure that the laws passed there were not in conflict with Imāmiyya Shīʿa (Naini 1955: 52–55).

The new role of the legal scholars has to do with the changes undergone by Shīʿa-dominated societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A good example of this is the development in Iran. Contacts with European ideas had the result that more and more people were influenced by constitutional ideas demanding political and social reform. It was in the same period that the art of printing reached the country, which meant that more and more people could be reached by the new ideas through printed books and newspapers. The changed situation meant that there were increasing demands on legal scholars to pronounce verdicts on various social and political matters. An illustrative example is the tobacco uprising in Iran in 1892. When the highest religious leader Mirza Shirazi (1814–1896) uttered his famous words about the use of tobacco being an act of war against the Hidden Imām, the statement had such a huge impact among the people that the reigning king was forced to annul the concession to the British company. The response also made the legal scholars aware of their own power.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a growing number of Imāmiyya Shīʿa legal scholars were speaking about the rule by foreigners in Shīʿa-dominated areas. This coincided with the weakening of central government, wars enforced by European colonial powers, and the increasing influence of Europeans over Muslim countries' politics, economy, and social and cultural life. This was viewed as a serious threat that had to be combated. When the secular rulers were unable to resist the external threat, the legal scholars saw it as their duty to use their influence to mobilise the public against this external threat (al-Ṣadr 1980: 2–3).

Although the Imāmiyya Shīʿa legal scholars had moved their positions forward, it would take a long time before they began to speak about taking over secular power themselves. Up to the start of the 1960s, they accepted the division of power that had been founded in the era of the Ṣafavids. For a long time,

the politically active Imāmiyya Shīʿa leaders worked to preserve the status quo. Many of them acted behind the scenes in order not to upset the division of power. After several unsuccessful attempts to introduce a constitutional form of government, however, and after new secular rulers disturbed the parallel power system, voices were heard calling for the introduction of a completely new form of government in which power would lie in the hands of the highest religious jurists.

The reaction of the legal scholars came after a series of political decisions which were interpreted as outright breaches of the parallel power system. Legal scholars were purged from the judicial and educational systems in the inter-war years. Parallel to this, the rulers in Persia/Iran started campaigns of modernisation and secularisation aimed against Islam and the legal scholars. A number of prominent Imāmiyya Shīʿa legal scholars declared that the state was in breach of the agreement about the parallel power system. The one who went furthest was Āyatallāh Rūḥallāh Khumaynī (Ayatollah Khomeini) (1902–1989), who thought that legal scholars were no longer bound by the agreement. At the start of the 1960s he launched a vehement attack on the king, whom he accused of not complying with any part of the agreement. He accused the king of being hostile to Imāmiyya Shīʿa. He also questioned the king's sovereignty and blamed him for having paved the way for foreign rule by conceding to alien powers. Ayatollah Khomeini said he wanted to introduce a new form of government based on Imāmiyya Shīʿa theology and jurisprudence, which in his view included a complete plan for society, comprising everything from political and economic to social and cultural matters (Mousavi Khomeini 1979: 23).

There was no consensus on this matter, however. Ayatollah Khomeini represented a minority view among Imāmiyya Shīʿa legal scholars. His political doctrine, *Velayat-e faqih*, the rule of the jurist (legal scholar), lacked support among the leading grand ayatollahs in the chief seat of Imāmiyya Shīʿa institutions in Najaf (Iraq) and Qom (Iran). A number of contemporary grand Ayatollahs in Imāmiyya Shīʿas most famous religious institutions in the Hawza of Najaf were against this doctrine. Among his leading opponents were Grand Ayatollahs al-Ḥakim (1889–1970), al-Khoei (1899–1992), and al-Sistani (1930). They considered his doctrine as something that lacked basis in the Qurʾān and Imāmiyya Shīʿa sources.

In connection with the revolution in Iran in 1979, the doctrine of rule by legal scholars became the state-bearing ideology. The shortcomings of the doctrine were exposed even more after this transition. Besides the quietist critics of the doctrine, more and more senior Imāmiyya Shīʿa legal scholars who had previously supported the doctrine joined in the critique. One of the foremost

defenders of the doctrine, the Grand Ayatollah Montazeri (1922–2009), turned his back on it in the mid-1980s. He drew attention to the totalitarian elements in the new form of government and demanded its replacement by a democratic form of government in which political power and religious institutions are separated (see for example his books *Eslam din-e feṭrat, Ḥokumat-e dini va ḥoquq-e ensan* and his memoirs, *Khâṭerat*, which was published on the internet).

6   Conclusion

The origins of Imāmiyya Shīʿa goes back to the theological and political struggle within the young Muslim community that started after the death of Islam's prophet Muḥammad. According to the Imāmiyya Shīʿa, the descendants of Muḥammad had the right qualifications to lead Muslims and to defend the fundamental principles of Islam. The Imāmiyya Shīʿa were defeated quickly. Their theological and legal perceptions were marginalised, and they were held outside the corridors of worldly power until the Ṣafavids took over the power in Persia in 1501, and proclaimed Imāmiyya Shīʿa as their state religion in their empire.

The Imāmiyya Shīʿa legal scholars perceived all worldly rulers by definition as illegitimate during the absence of the Hidden Imām. However, in reality they had to relate to the new conditions when the Ṣafavid kings committed themselves to defend Shīʿa Islam. This became the start of a parallel power system, according to which the legal scholars had the power over the judiciary system, education, social welfare and the mission. All other worldly powers were in the hands of the kings. The unique collaboration between the worldly rulers and the religious leaders was the most important background for the leaning of the Imāmiyya Shīʿa scholars towards political pragmatism. This system of distribution of the power lasted until the twentieth century.

A new political doctrine that rejected the parallel power system was presented in the mid-twentieth century, following the socio-political changes that occurred. This doctrine put all the power in the hands of the highest Imāmiyya Shīʿa legal scholars, but the new doctrine eventually encountered tough criticism. The critics took their frame of reference from the religious context and firmly anchored the criticism in the soil of the Islamic/Shīʿa theological and judicial tradition. Their reason-oriented, rationalist approached critique emphasised that the doctrine lacked theological and judicial basis. They also pointed out that the political regime founded on it was dysfunctional. Their

criticism opened the door for the will to create harmony between the inter-
preting of Imāmiyya Shī'a theology and jurisprudence and the frames of refer-
ences provided by modern society. It can also be seen as an attempt to answer
the challenges of modernity and globalisation.

This brief survey shows that the outlook on secular power in Imāmiyya Shī'a
and the religious legitimacy of worldly power is grounded to some extent on
theological ideas and Imāmiyya Shī'a jurisprudence, but that it has undergone
major changes due to social, political, and historical circumstances. Imāmiyya
Shī'a's history of ideas is not limited to various theological, philosophical, polit-
ical ideas and *fiqh*, jurisprudence. Another tradition of ideas within Imāmiyya
Shī'a is *'irfān*, which, like Ṣūfism, seeks other paths to truth beyond the sources
of knowledge of theology, philosophy and jurisprudence.

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