

From

# FAITH + POWER: THE POLITICS OF ISLAM

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## CHAPTER ONE

### *Traditional Muslim Attitudes to Political Power*

Render therefore unto Caesar the things which be Caesar's,  
and unto God the things which be God's.

*Luke 20:25*

O believers, obey God, and obey the Messenger and those in  
authority among you.

*The Koran, IV, 62<sup>1</sup>*

GOD INTERVENED in human history, at a specific time and place, directly and decisively, once and for all, by revealing Himself to mankind. That is the central belief of Islam, as it is of Christianity. Christians believe that God Himself became a human being and redeemed human nature by making it His own. As St John puts it, '... the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.' To Muslims, as to Jews, that notion seems blasphemous because it detracts from the absolute oneness of God and thus opens the door to idolatry. Muslims believe that the Word of God was communicated to a human being. That human being, Muhammad, was chosen to be the messenger of God. Clearly, he was a man of special talents, but no Muslim believes that he was anything other than a man, or that he was the author of the Word of God, which he passed on by reciting it to his fellow human beings. (The word Koran, or *Qur'ân*, means 'recitation'.)

That is why Muslims do not like to be called Muhammadans. They do not regard themselves as followers of Muhammad, but

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as people who have accepted the Word of God and surrendered themselves to His will. *Islām* means surrender, and a Muslim is one who surrenders. The importance of Muhammad is that he was the human vehicle through which the Word was communicated. The creed in which a Muslim affirms his faith consists of a single sentence: 'There is no God but God, and Muhammad is His Messenger.'

Christians believe that the divine intervention occurred in Palestine, at the time when that country was gradually and painfully being incorporated into the Roman Empire. Muslims believe it happened in the Hijaz (western Arabia), on the fringes of both the later, Greek-speaking Roman Empire (which we now call Byzantine) and its great rival, the Sassanid Empire of Persia, at a time when the two had fought each other to exhaustion and both were on the verge of collapse. These differences of places and time had an important effect on the doctrines of the two faiths with respect to political power.

Jesus of Nazareth was born into a community whose religion was an expression of its national independence, at a time when that national independence was in the process of being crushed. Given the overwhelming power of the Roman Empire, a revival of the Jewish religion in its nationalistic form was bound to lead to disaster — and did so forty years after Jesus's death. Jesus offered a way out of this blind alley by expounding a non-political interpretation of Judaism: 'My kingdom is not of this world.' While claiming to be the national leader (Messiah) whom Jewish prophets had predicted, he offered salvation only in the world to come, and to be achieved by individuals through faith, hope and charity, rather than by the nation through organized revolt. By implication, salvation in this sense was not reserved for Jews only. After Jesus's death, St Paul made this explicit. Christianity became an invitation to all who suffered under the Roman Empire to hope for a better world after death.

Yet the notion of a non-political religion was a novel one, which the Roman Empire itself could not take at face value. The expression of allegiance the Empire expected from its subjects was

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to acknowledge the divinity of the emperor. Since Christians refused this they were persecuted, with varying degrees of intensity, until the day came (three centuries after Jesus) when the emperor himself became Christian. Once that happened, Christianity was no longer non-political. A Christian ruler was naturally expected to follow Christian precepts, to advance true Christian doctrine, and to suppress heresy. It was more than a thousand years before a school of political thought arose suggesting that religious belief was a matter for individuals, with which the state need not concern itself. Yet all this time Christians kept alive the notion of 'the church' as something distinct from the state. Though church and state might be composed of the same people, they had separate leaderships whose roles were in theory distinct and complementary, even if in practice overlapping and often conflicting. In the last 200 years church and state have moved apart in many Christian societies. Christians have been able to justify this by going back to Christianity's original doctrines.

This has led many people of Christian background to expect something similar to happen in the world of Islam. But that involves a profound misunderstanding, since in most Muslim societies there is not and never has been such a thing as a church. The community of believers founded by Muhammad was, virtually from the beginning, what we should call a state.

Muhammad grew up in the city of Mecca in the late sixth century AD. It was a trading city that had recently grown wealthy and in which the tribal system of the surrounding desert had begun to break down. The rich behaved with arrogance and selfishness while widows and orphans starved. The revelations which Muhammad began to receive in about AD 609 attacked this arrogance and selfishness of the rich and also the gods whose shrines made Mecca a place of pilgrimage and thus increased its wealth. To begin with Muhammad may not have had any political ambitions, but since he was criticizing the ruling class and the bases of its power it treated him as if he had. Life in Mecca was made increasingly uncomfortable for him and his followers until in AD 622 he left the city with a small band of supporters, accept-

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and, in fact, different schools of jurisprudence were recognized as authoritative in different parts of the Muslim world. But they diverged on points of detail rather than essentials, and where they agreed their verdict was held to be binding. For Muhammad had said: 'My community will not agree on an error.'

As guardians of the Holy Law, the *ulama* came to occupy in the Muslim world a position comparable in some respects to that of the clergy in medieval Europe. Not that they were regarded as having any spiritual power: they could not administer sacraments, pardon sins, pronounce excommunication or in any other way mediate between man and God. But, because they were respected for their learning, and sometimes for their piety and wisdom, their support was needed to legitimize political power; and against a ruler who failed to uphold the Law as they interpreted it they could act as leaders of the opposition and champions of the oppressed. Like the churchmen of the West, they sought to influence political power rather than to assume it themselves.

Gradually, therefore, the political rulers of Islam lost their religious aura. It came to be considered that only the first four caliphs after Muhammad had been truly orthodox. The Umayyad dynasty that succeeded them (AD 661-750) was seen as more or less a reversion to secular kingship. The Abbāsid caliphs, who ruled in Baghdad from AD 750 onwards, enjoyed rather greater prestige. Although in the period of their greatest power their autocratic tendencies and predilection for Persian models of culture and statecraft brought them into conflict with many of the *ulama*,\* as their power declined they came to rely more on the *ulama*'s support. Later still, as the empire began to break up and real power was assumed by provincial governors and warlords, the caliphs were retained as symbols of Islamic unity and legitimacy: formal acknowledgement of the Abbāsid caliph was the way for a Muslim ruler to indicate that he and his subjects belonged

\* Persian influence also led them to claim a kind of religious authority which might well have shocked Muhammad and his immediate successors. They called themselves *Khalīfat Allāh* - God's deputy - and even 'the shadow of God upon earth'.

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to the universal community of Islam and were not heretics or schismatics. That lasted until AD 1258, when Baghdad was sacked by the Mongols. Thereafter, a line of puppet caliphs was maintained in Cairo by the Mamlūk sultans of Egypt, but not recognized anywhere outside their dominions. In 1517 the Mamluk sultanate was, in its turn, conquered by the Ottoman Empire, after which no one seems to have bothered with the title of caliph for more than 200 years.

In a sense, then, all genuine political authority in the mainstream Muslim tradition was secular after the loss of effective power by the Abbasids in the tenth century AD. Virtue and justice were no longer regarded as indispensable qualifications of a ruler. Full enforcement of the Shari'a came to be seen as an ideal rather than a necessity. Political power was no longer the instrument through which the ideal community could be realized, but merely a prosaic necessity for the maintenance of order and security, and thus of the minimum conditions in which the faith could be practised and the Muslim community survive. By the eleventh century AD most of the *ulama* were teaching that obedience was an absolute duty, even to an unjust ruler, since an unjust ruler was better than none at all.

Yet to describe this attitude as legitimizing all *de facto* power, however corrupt, would be going too far. It could equally well be read as smearing all political power with a taint of illegitimacy, since no Muslim state was able to enforce the totality of the Shari'a and all fell short of the high standard supposedly set by Muhammad and his immediate successors. In theory the power of the ruler was strictly limited by the law, which he had no power to make or unmake since it came from God. And if successive generations of the *ulama* set tighter and tighter limits to their own power of interpreting the law, that was partly at least to protect themselves and the community from pressure by the ruler to reinterpret it to suit his interests.

They preached obedience, not in a spirit of servile glorification of the ruler, but rather as a measure of expediency and self-preservation. One must obey unjust princes, wrote Abu Hamid



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al-Ghazālī (1058-1111), the great systematizer who has been called the St Augustine of Islamic thought, but one must not thereby condone their injustice. The devout Muslim should avoid the court and company of the unjust ruler, and should rebuke him: by words if he can safely do so, by silence if words might encourage rebellion.<sup>2</sup>

The condemnation of rebellion is explicit, but, even in this thinker who was to be a source-book for Muslim conservatives of the next eight centuries, there is also an implicit endorsement of the premises of rebellion: the notion that the political order should be judged by religious credentials, and that the ruler is failing in his duty if the Shari'a is not enforced.

We could say, then, that whereas Christianity started as a politically quietist faith and was drawn by circumstances into activism, Islam at its beginnings was closely identified with political action but later accommodated itself to circumstances with a degree of quietism. But in both cases the adaptation involved a certain malaise. As the prince of the church was vulnerable to the criticism of the barefoot friar, so the *alim* (singular of *ulama*) who comfortably rationalized the status quo was never fully armed against the reformer calling for revolution to restore the supremacy of the Shari'a and a truly Islamic order. Hence the observation of a modern scholar that, while the history of Islam tends to be seen 'as an everlasting submission to God's will, in fact it could far more accurately be characterized as a permanent revolution'.<sup>3</sup>

## CHAPTER TWO

### *The Historic Divisions of Islam*

How is it with you, that you do not fight in the way of God, and for the men, women, and children who, being abased, say, 'Our Lord, bring us forth from this city whose people are evildoers, and appoint to us a protector from Thee, and appoint to us from Thee a helper'?

*The Koran, IV, 77*

THE WORDS 'revolution' and 'revolutionary' have a modern ring to them. Yet they do not seem out of place when applied to Muhammad's achievement in seventh-century Arabia. Muhammad's career was the classic one of a revolutionary leader. He started as a more or less isolated critic of the prevailing social order. Finding his calls for reform unheeded and himself the object of the establishment's wrath, he fled with a small band of dedicated supporters to an area where circumstances assured him a degree of local support. From there he issued a call to arms and began military operations, at first on a small scale which we might today call guerrilla warfare (the harassment of Meccan trading caravans). The conflict gradually escalated through a series of skirmishes, battles, retreats, showdowns with allies or dissident supporters, truces ... with Muhammad all the time expanding his base of support until at last the regime crumbled and he was able to re-enter Mecca as its effective ruler and on his own terms. In the course of the struggle his ideology had been refined and amplified so that finally the old order was replaced by an entirely new system



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whose internal dynamism, combined with its attractiveness to outsiders, enabled it to impose itself far beyond the particular society to which the original message had been addressed. If that is not a revolution, what is?

Of course, a revolution, once successful, will tend to institutionalize itself and become a point of reference for future generations of conservatives. In the case of Islam we saw part of that process at work in the previous chapter. But we also saw that for such conservatives the revolutionary nature of their theoretical ideal is a kind of Achilles heel. It can always be used against them. The Koran is full of injunctions to the believers to 'struggle in the way of God'. In the context, of course, the struggle (*jihād*) in question was against unbelievers. But was it not logical to suppose that such a struggle would be equally necessary later against those corrupt Muslims who introduced into the Muslim community those very evils of arrogance, selfishness, injustice, etc., which the Koran had denounced in the pagan society of Muhammad's time?

Not surprisingly, it has seemed so to successive generations of Muslim reformers and malcontents. The history of Islam, especially its first few centuries, is full of movements that sought simultaneously to restore what they saw as the true doctrine of Islam and to overthrow the existing political order. Again, it is unlikely that in their own minds the leaders of these movements made any distinction between these two objectives. Many of these movements gave birth to sects that still exist in some form today; and even those Muslims who do not adhere to such sects are indirectly affected by them, since it was in the course of these early conflicts that the Sunna — the Beaten Path or tradition which the majority of Muslims follow — was defined. Some knowledge of them is therefore necessary for an understanding of the contemporary politics of Islam. I shall give here only a most summary and selective account.

Khārijism and Shi'ism, the two great tendencies that split off from the main body of Islam early in its life, both have their origin in

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events that occurred within a generation after Muhammad's death, as his successors struggled to cope with the unexpected problems of managing an enormous empire. The third caliph, Uthmān, who succeeded in AD 644, came from the Umayyā, one of the old ruling families of Mecca. He antagonized many of the soldiers in the conquering Arab armies by appointing his own relatives to provincial governorships and reserving for them a share in the spoils, and also by making the first attempt to impose religious uniformity on the Muslim community: after issuing an authorized version of the Koran he ordered the destruction of all variant copies, thereby imposing his own authority on the provincial preachers. In AD 656 a group of mutinous soldiers returned to Medina and killed him. Muhammad's cousin Alī, who had been passed over when Uthman was elected, was then acclaimed as caliph by the Muslims present in Medina. Alī's failure to take action against those responsible for Uthman's murder, some of whom were his own supporters, led to risings against him and the first civil war between Muslims.

The most serious rising was that of the governor of Syria, Mu'āwīya, a relative of Uthman, who refused to acknowledge Alī as caliph and fought an inconclusive battle against him at Siffin (between Syria and Iraq) in AD 658. After this Alī agreed to let the dispute be judged by two arbitrators 'according to the Koran'. But this compromise was rejected by a group of Alī's more fanatical supporters, who now turned against him, proclaiming 'there is no judgement but God's'. (The implication was that Uthman's murder had been just punishment for his errors as caliph.)

## The Khārijites

These people became known as Khārijites, from an Arabic word meaning 'to go out' — implying both secession and rebellion. They were the first distinct sect to appear in Islam. As with almost all subsequent sects, their separation was self-imposed. It was they who proclaimed that all who did not follow them were outlaws and unbelievers. By contrast, the mainstream community of Sunni

Muslims (those who follow the Sunna) has always been willing to accept a great diversity of opinions, drawing the line only at those which appear to deny either the oneness of God or the finality of the revelation to Muhammad.

The Kharijites maintained that a grave sinner no longer remains a Muslim, and they therefore proclaimed *jihad* against the rest of the community and particularly its leaders, seeking to bring about political change through violence and assassination — of which Ali himself was an early victim in AD 661. They were absolute and uncompromising egalitarians, arguing that all men were equal in the sight of God and equally accountable to Him, and therefore rejecting any notion of privilege, whether for the family of Muhammad, for the Meccan tribe of Quraish from which he sprang, or for the Arabs in general. The only criterion of virtue was of faith. The test of faith was good works, therefore any conspicuous sinner was disqualified. The true believers were instructed by the Koran to 'command good and forbid evil'. This gave them both the right and the duty to overthrow an unjust caliph, and in his place to choose any one of themselves who was morally and religiously irreproachable, 'even if he were a black slave'.

Naturally, this doctrine had a considerable appeal for the underdogs of the Muslim empire, particularly the non-Arab (especially Persian) converts. For the Kharijites carried their egalitarian theology into the social and political sphere as well, favouring an equitable distribution of wealth and a form of primitive democracy. Their continual insurrections disturbed the peace of the eastern part of the empire throughout the Umayyad period (AD 661–750), and continued under the Abbasids. Their forces were repeatedly crushed, and eventually only a more moderate variant of the movement survived — the Ibādiya, which abandoned both the practice of assassination and the excommunication of mainstream Muslims. (It survives today in Oman and in small communities in East and North Africa.)

As far as most Muslims are concerned, the Kharijites put themselves beyond the pale of respectability by their fanaticism and violence against fellow Muslims, and therefore most Muslim move-

ments of today would strongly disclaim any connection with them. Yet in a sense they were the prototype of all subsequent Muslim revival movements, and especially those which are today called 'fundamentalist'.

### The Shī'a

Kharijite influence on later Islam has been mainly indirect. But the other great sect, the Shī'a, still has numerous adherents in many parts of the Islamic world, and in Iran it is the official religion of the state. From this tradition came the ideology of the Iranian revolution.

At the time of Ali's death in AD 661 the *Shī'a* at Ali, or party of Ali, was probably no more than that: a party or tendency of people supporting Ali's claim to the caliphate. That claim was based on Ali's closeness to Muhammad as a member of his immediate family — his first cousin, in some sense his adoptive brother, the husband of his favourite daughter Fātima and father of his favourite grandsons. (Muhammad had no surviving sons.) Ali was felt to be a more authentic representative of what Muhammad had stood for than the wealthy and worldly Umayyads. His personal piety and virtue may indeed have compared favourably with theirs; but in the minds of his followers this fact was clearly connected with the close blood relationship between the two men.

After Ali's death the leadership of this school of thought passed naturally to his two sons, Hasan and Husain, who were also Muhammad's grandsons. Although they were not strong enough to prevent Mu'awiya from establishing himself as caliph and so founding the Umayyad dynasty, Ali's descendants became an important focus of opposition to that dynasty. The notion spread that rightful leadership of the Muslim community belonged to Muhammad's family, who enjoyed a special sanctity. Only when the rule of Muhammad's rightful heir was established would the tyranny and injustice of the existing order be replaced by good government in accordance with the Koran and the example (Sunna) of the Prophet. This heir would be the Mahdi, a leader directly



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guided by God. A variety of predictions about this Messianic figure were soon attributed to Muhammad himself.

The Umayyad period was punctuated by frequent revolts based on these ideas. The one that eventually proved successful was led not by Ali's descendants but by those of Muhammad's uncle, Abbās, resulting in the Abbasid caliphate. It was only after this, after the Abbasids had repudiated Shi'ite ideas and made themselves the new establishment, that the Shi'a took on the form of a sect, or rather a family of rival sects, distinct from the mainstream of the Muslim community.

The essential belief of the Shi'a is that the historic caliphs were merely *de facto* rulers, while the rightful leadership of Islam passed through a kind of apostolic succession of Imāms, starting with Ali and carrying on down in the male line. The Imam may or may not be in a position to exercise political power, but his spiritual authority is seen as an essential ingredient of Islam: 'Whosoever dies without knowing the true Imam of his time dies the death of an unbeliever.' The Imam is not equal to the Prophet: the divine revelation in the Koran remains final and complete. But the interpretation of the Koran is not simply a matter of learning. Divine guidance is necessary and this is imparted through the Imam. Thus Shi'ism accepts the notion of spiritual authority in a sense that Sunni Islam does not, and it makes a distinction, even if it is a *de facto* rather than a *de jure* one, between spiritual and temporal authority. The Christian notion of a church, and of relations between church and state, is therefore more closely paralleled in Shi'ism than elsewhere.

Islam in general sanctifies political action. Sunni Islam is the doctrine of power and achievement. Shi'a Islam is the doctrine of opposition. The starting point of Shi'ism is defeat: the defeat of Ali and his house by the Umayyads. Its primary appeal is therefore to the defeated and the oppressed. That is why it has so often been the rallying cry of the underdogs in the Muslim world. Central to Shi'ism's appeal, especially for the poor and dispossessed, is the theme of suffering and martyrdom — a theme reminiscent at times of Christianity. For Shi'ites the Kin of the

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Prophet — especially his daughter Fatima, her husband Ali and their two sons Hasan and Husain — are a Holy Family in almost the Christian sense of the phrase; and the passion of Husain, massacred with his family by the armies of Mu'awiya's son, Yazid, in the hopelessly unequal battle of Karbalā (AD 680), is virtually equivalent to that of Christ, celebrated every year in innumerable passion plays and penitential processions.

### 'TWELVER' SHI'ISM

The main branch of the Shi'a surviving today is known as that of the 'Twelvers' because it traces the line of Imams from Ali down to the twelfth, after which it comes to a stop. The twelfth Imam is believed to be not dead but hidden, and will one day return as Mahdi to purify the world. This is the Shi'ism that has been the official doctrine of the Persian state since the sixteenth century, and is today followed by about 80 per cent of the population of Iran, by the majority of the Arabs in neighbouring Iraq and by substantial minorities in Turkey, India, Pakistan, Lebanon and the Arab Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia.

In all these countries, except Iran, political power has usually been in the hands of Sunnis. That Twelver Shi'ism has survived so successfully under Sunni rule is mainly due to the fact that historically it was the least politically activist, if not non-political, party within the Shi'a. The nine Imams after Husain were people who escaped repression by the caliphs of their time precisely because they did not put themselves forward as claimants to political power, but were content with providing spiritual guidance to their followers. In time, at least an implicit connection came to be made between the virtue and piety of Ali and his sons and their lack of political success: they were seen as unworldly, even self-effacing men, lacking both the ambition and the deviousness which political success requires. Thus Ali allowed himself to be passed over three times in the choice of caliph, although he knew himself to be the rightful claimant, biding his time until the caliphate was thrust upon him after the death of Uthman. He then proceeded to dismiss all the bad but powerful governors appointed



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by Uthman, thus uniting them against him instead of manoeuvring to pick them off one by one; and at the battle of Siffin, out of respect for the Koran and reluctance to shed unnecessary blood, he let himself be tricked into accepting arbitration on unfavourable terms. After his death his son Hasan abdicated the caliphate rather than pursue the civil war against Mu'awiya (on whose orders he is, none the less, supposed to have been poisoned); and finally the revolt of Husain, Ali's second son, against Mu'awiya's impious son Yazid, is presented not as a bid for power but as an act of deliberate martyrdom, intended to show up the brutal and sinful character of Umayyad rule and thus inspire a spiritual and moral revival.

According to Twelver doctrine, the Imams did not abandon their claim to leadership of the community. They simply chose not to assert it politically in unfavourable circumstances. Rather than legitimizing the existing government, they authorized their followers to obey it — and even, if necessary, to dissemble their true beliefs — in spite of its illegitimacy. The doctrine of the Hidden Imam made it easier for the faithful to bear the evils of the present, by explaining that the world would be set to rights when — but, by implication, only when — he returned.

#### OTHER VARIANTS OF THE SHI'Ā

By no means all Shi'ites accepted the political quietism of the Twelvers. The opposite view was taken by Zaid, a grandson of Husain, who argued that a true Imam must claim the title publicly and strive actively to overthrow the corrupt regime of the usurpers. True to these principles, he led an unsuccessful rising against the Umayyads, in the course of which he was killed. His followers, the Zaidis, recognize him as Imam in preference to his quietist brother and nephew, who are the fifth and sixth Imams of the Twelvers, and trace the succession onwards from him. They reject the doctrine of the Hidden Imam and do not insist on an unbroken dynastic succession. For them the Imam may be any adult descendant of Ali who has sufficient learning and military ability, and there may even be 'several imams at one time'. Today they

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survive only in Yemen, which was ruled by Zaidi imams until 1962. Doctrinally, the Zaidis are closer to the Sunnis than other branches of the Shi'ā.

More radical movements, in both social and theological terms, arose among the Isma'ilis, followers of Ismā'il, the eldest son of the Sixth Imam, whom the Twelvers excluded from the succession because he was alleged to have drunk wine. He, and in some cases his son Muhammad, became the focus of a number of movements seeking to overthrow not only the Abbasid caliphate but the whole social order on which it was based, and at the same time to reinterpret Islam, incorporating into it some of the ideas of the Hellenistic Christian culture that had dominated the Near East before its arrival. They held that the Koran contained an 'inner', allegorical meaning, which was secretly transmitted to Ali and by him through the line of Imams. Only through a graded secret teaching, after a careful initiation process, could the faithful gain access to this hidden interpretation. The masses had to be content with the apparent meaning, while the initiate, after ascending through the various grades of instruction, would discover the single divine Truth of which all popular religions are merely inane, garbled versions.

Paradoxically, this ultra-elitist doctrine, by providing the certainty of divine guidance, inspired popular revolts. One of the most interesting was that of the Qarmatians, named after their leader Hamdān Qarmat, who set up a kind of communist people's republic near Kūfa, in Iraq, in the late ninth century AD. They subsequently gained control of Bahrain where their state survived for two hundred years. They upheld the common ownership of all goods of general utility, in the name of the (absent) Imam. But like many revolutionary movements they acquired a reputation for terrorism and atrocities, became objects of widespread hatred, fear and persecution, and eventually disappeared.

A successor movement, better organized, was that of the Fātimids — descendants of Fatima and Ali through the line of Isma'il — who in the tenth century AD proclaimed themselves caliphs in North Africa, and ruled Egypt from 969 to 1171. Claim-

ing to be the rightful Imams of all Muslims, they sent emissaries throughout South-West Asia to win converts and foment opposition against the Abbasid caliphs. Once again, subversive religious doctrine appealed to people with political and social grievances, this time particularly in Syria and Persia. While in Egypt the Fatimid caliphate took on the usual characteristics of an establishment, in the east Isma'ilism remained a revolutionary movement.

In 1094 a split occurred when the eastern leader, Hasan Ibn al-Sabbāh, refused to recognize the new caliph, al-Musta'ī, claiming instead to support his brother Nizar, who had disappeared in suspicious circumstances. Ibn al-Sabbāh, 'the Old Man of the Mountain', conducted guerrilla warfare against the Abbasids from a remote mountain fortress in Persia called Alamut. The Nizārī sect, which he founded, is better known to history as the Assassins (takers of hashish), a name given to it by its enemies. (Our word 'assassination' derives from the Nizaris' tactic of sending suicide missions to kill the commanders of armies that threatened to overrun their strongholds.) Yet, even this group was tamed by the passage of time. It was revived in more peaceable form in the nineteenth century, and today has a worldwide following, mainly of business people originating from the Indian sub-continent, with well-organized welfare services for its less fortunate members. Its Imam is better known as the Aga Khan. The rival, Musta'īlian, branch of Isma'ilism is also found mainly in India, as well as in Yemen.

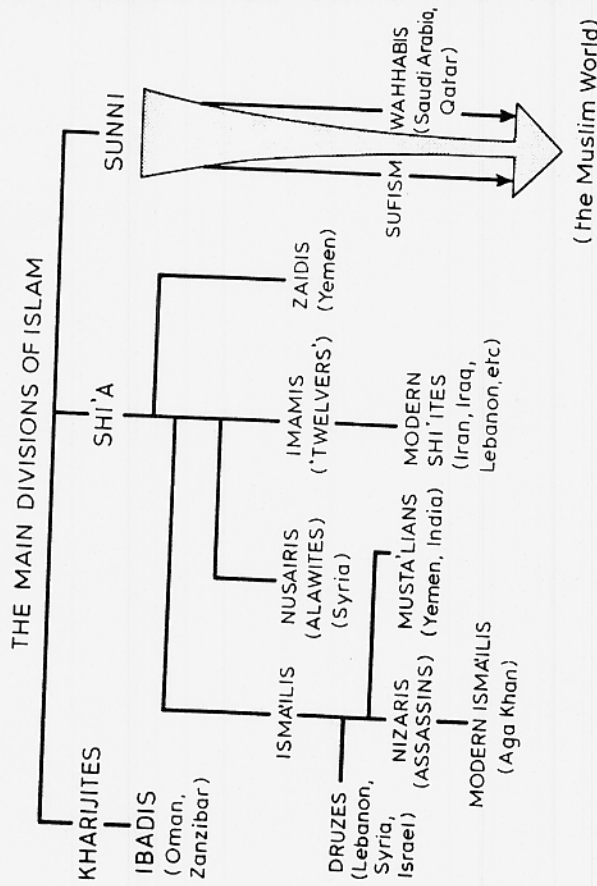
Some offshoots of Isma'ilism took Shi'a doctrine to such an extreme point as to put themselves more or less beyond the pale of Islam. One such group is the Nusairis of Syria, also known as Alawis (followers of Ali—a term used in some other countries for the Shi'a in general). There is a good deal of confusion about their beliefs. It is generally said of them that they worship Ali as God (which would certainly make them non-Muslims), but this may be an over-simplification. The point has become a politically sensitive one in Syria because of the dominant position which this hitherto underprivileged community has acquired in the ruling Ba'th party, as a result of its overrepresentation among army

officers. The Syrian constitution lays down that the President of the Republic must be a Muslim, and there is some doubt whether President Hafiz al-Asad fulfils this condition. Some say that by pronouncing the *shahada*—'There is no God but God and Muhammad is His messenger'—Mr Asad in effect renounced the Nusairi creed in which he was brought up and became a Muslim, like Henri IV of France becoming a Catholic. The Alawis themselves, however, claim that they are Muslims, and in the 1970s their claim was endorsed by the leader of the Twelver Shi'ites in Lebanon, 'Imam' Musa Sadr, who was anxious to secure Syrian protection for his community in the Lebanese civil war. (It should be added that Sunni hostility towards Alawis in Syria is not directed at their religious beliefs so much as their alleged corruption and nepotism.)

Similar doubts exist about the Druzes, who carried to an extreme the Isma'ili doctrine according to which each of the attributes, or component principles, of God was made manifest to mankind in the personality of a prophet or *imam*. An eleventh-century leader, Darazi, proclaimed that one of the Fatimid caliphs, Hākim (996–1021), was the manifestation of God in His unity. His followers, known as Druzes, address prayers to Hākim and call him 'Our Lord', as well as looking forward to his reappearance. This is generally considered to make them non-Muslims, since the cardinal sin in Islam is to attribute any kind of plurality to God or to place any person or thing on a level with Him. The Druzes do, however, observe some Muslim festivals and some recognizably Islamic laws (though they do not fast during the holy month of Ramadan, nor make the pilgrimage to Mecca). They stopped making new converts soon after their foundation and today remain a closed sect, with members in Lebanon, Syria and Israel. The most famous contemporary Druze was Kamal Jumblatt, leader of the left in the Lebanese civil war, who was assassinated in 1977.



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## Theology and Politics

By no means all the early disputes within Islam resulted in formal schisms or the creation of separate sects. More often rival schools of thought coexisted for a time until one or other of them was condemned by the consensus of the *ulama* and petered out, but even then some of its ideas would usually live on, sometimes synthesized with those of its opponents into a new version of orthodoxy.

Muslim theology as such lies outside the scope of this book. But one or two of the early schools of thought need to be mentioned because their ideas continue to play a part in the struggles of today. Of particular importance in this respect are the *Mu'tazilites*, or neutralists — so-called probably because they adopted an intermediate position between the Kharijites, who regarded a grave sinner as an outright infidel, and the main body of Muslims who

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considered him a 'sinner-Muslim'. Their importance lies in the fact that they were the first to attempt a justification of Islam in rational and philosophical terms. This led them to argue that reason was an equal source, with divine revelation, of moral truth. They argued that reason was an aspect of the inherent justice of God, and that God could not, by definition, do that which was unreasonable or unjust. Therefore, God could not be held responsible for human acts: human beings enjoy free will and are responsible for their own actions.

The *Mu'tazilites'* concept of God was a highly abstract one. They explained away all anthropomorphic descriptions of Him in the Koran or the Tradition as mere figures of speech. Rejecting the notion that the Koran was the eternal, 'uncreated' Word of God, they insisted that He had created it in a specific time and place, for a specific purpose.

These ideas have proved very attractive to Islamic modernists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, who have found in them a basis for reconciling Islam with some modern Western ideas, including political liberalism. In their time, however, the *Mu'tazilites* were apologists for political absolutism. The Abbasid caliphs of the early ninth century seized on their doctrine of the createdness of the Koran. For by situating the Koran in a particular place and time the doctrine implicitly allowed for the possibility that in a different place and time God might have something different to say. This in turn implied some discretion for God's representative or deputy on earth at a given time — the caliph or *imam* — to declare 'abrogated' some specific commands of the Koran or to set aside provisions of the Shari'a. By contrast, those *ulama* who struck to a literal interpretation of the Koran and insisted that it was God's uncreated speech, an essential part of His being, were those who sought to limit the power of the caliph, using the Shari'a as the equivalent of a constitution and themselves as the equivalent of a supreme court. (Though, of course, they would not have used that phrase: the only *supreme* court would be the final judgement of God Himself.)

The caliphs and the *Mu'tazilites* sought for a short time to



impose their doctrine of the createdness of the Koran by force, instituting a kind of inquisition. One of the most famous Islamic jurists, Ahmad ibn Hanbal, the founder of one of the four great schools of law in Sunni Islam, was actually flogged and imprisoned for refusing to accept the doctrine. But after about sixteen years the policy was abandoned and the Mu'tazilites fell from grace. Apparently, the caliphs realized the danger of trying to govern without the *ulama's* support.

But the Mu'tazilites did not vanish without trace. Their intellectual approach was reflected even in the arguments used to refute them. The great formulator of the orthodox position in the next generation, Abul-Hasan al-Ash'ari, had studied with a Mu'tazilite master. While refuting specific doctrines of the Mu'tazilites, such as their attempt to confine God within the human concept of justice, their assertion that God does not create or produce human actions, that God is pure essence without attributes and that therefore the Koran cannot be His eternal, uncreated speech, al-Ash'ari followed them in seeking to provide Islam with a systematic, internally consistent theology. What is today regarded as 'orthodox' Islamic theology is essentially his system.<sup>1</sup>

The Mu'tazilites were followed by another, more thoroughgoing rationalist movement, that of the **philosophers**, of whom the most important were al-Fārābī (died AD 950), Ibn Sīnā (AD 980-1037), known in the West as Avicenna, and Ibn Rushd (Averroes, AD 1126-98). Their ideas were derived from Greek thought — especially Plato and Aristotle — which they attempted to reconcile with Islam, but did so essentially by reducing the Koran to a kind of brilliant metaphor whose object was to express the rational truth of the universe in terms that were meaningful to the common man. Not surprisingly, this view of religion was unacceptable to the great majority of the *ulama*, and they had relatively little influence on the general development of Islamic thought, except in so far as it was to refute their ideas that al-Ghazali developed his theology. But they were magnificent examples of the freedom and breadth of Islamic culture in its heyday, and did have a notable impact on the thought of medieval Europe. (It was through Aver-

roes that Aristotle was rediscovered by the West.) Consequently, there has been a tendency to rehabilitate them in the last hundred years or so on the part of Muslim modernist intellectuals, who seek to demonstrate the equality or superiority of Islam to the Western intellectual tradition.<sup>2</sup>

Far more important for the future of Islam as a whole was the development of **Sufism**. The original Sūfīs (probably so called in allusion to their simple woollen garments — *sūf* is the Arabic for wool) were essentially mystics: pious Muslims who believed that through meditation and self-discipline they had attained a direct personal experience of God. There is nothing un-Islamic about this; indeed, Muhammad himself was clearly a mystic in this sense, at least in the early part of his career. But Sufism did provide a kind of corrective to the predominant emphasis of the first century of Islam, which was on the expansion and organization of the Muslim community rather than the spiritual development of the individual soul, and on the omnipotence and transcendence of God rather than His immanence and accessibility to direct human knowledge.

As time went on, Sufism itself became gradually institutionalized. Individual mystics attracted groups of followers who learned to imitate their 'path' (*tariqa*) — a series of mental and sometimes physical exercises leading up to communion with God. In time the word *tariqa* came to mean a group of people following a particular Sufi *shaikh* (old man, teacher), and these groups took on a quasi-monastic organization — sometimes actually living together in a monastery, sometimes travelling, preaching and teaching, rather like the friars of medieval Europe. Thus, one can speak of Sufi 'orders' or 'brotherhoods' (*taruq*), some of which have existed from the twelfth or thirteenth century AD until the present day (usually undergoing many changes and revivals) and can be found in many different countries.

The Sufi preachers developed an approach to Islam based on personal piety, which was often easier for simple people to accept than the somewhat arid, scholastic and legalistic approach of the *ulama*. Through Sufism, Islam was able to absorb many religious

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beliefs and practices that were non-Islamic in origin but deeply rooted in the culture of the peoples who were converted to Islam. Islam thus adapted itself to widely differing cultures, and after the first generation of Arab military conquest the Sufis became its most effective missionaries. Sufi leaders came to be venerated as local saints and credited with miracles, especially after their deaths, when their tombs often became centres of pilgrimage. They also emerged, at various times and places, as champions of the masses against a corrupt or aristocratic establishment with which the *ulama* had become too closely associated.

Many of the early Sufis were strongly influenced by Shi'ite ideas, at a time when the Shi'a was still more a school of thought than a clearly distinct sect. One such idea, which was to be of great political importance, was that of the Mahdī, the divinely guided leader who would appear at the end of time and restore the supremacy of justice and Islam over ungodly forces. This idea never became a formal doctrine for Sunni Muslims, as it did for the Twelver Shi'ites, but thanks to the Sufi preachers it gained a strong hold on the imagination of many ordinary Muslims who considered themselves orthodox Sunnis, and though not positively endorsed, neither is it condemned by the consensus of Sunni *ulama*.

The *ulama* in general have been suspicious of various aspects of Sufism — essentially those which seemed to encourage superstition — but have been astute enough to try and exercise some control over it rather than condemn it outright. The execution of the ninth-century mystic al-Hallāj, who was accused of identifying himself with God by proclaiming: 'I am the Truth', was a traumatic event, which neither the Sufis nor the *ulama* of later centuries wanted to repeat. A synthesis of the two attitudes, perhaps not fully satisfactory to either side but giving at least a *modus vivendi*, was provided two centuries later by al-Ghazali, whose brother was a leading Sufi and who himself sought to follow the path — though whether he genuinely achieved mystic experience is a disputed point. His conclusion was that mysticism did not enable one to learn any *facts* about God (or ultimate Reality) that were not already contained in the Koranic revelation; but that it was a

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meaningful and valuable way of *apprehending* Reality, since true faith should be a thing not only of the mind but of the heart. Properly understood, therefore, Sufism was not a challenge to the Shari'a, but a way of strengthening and deepening one's allegiance to it. The main flock of Sufis thus passed within the fold of Sunni orthodoxy, though there continued to be lost sheep from time to time.<sup>3</sup>

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ing an invitation to settle in the oasis of Yathrib, afterwards called Medina ('the City'), some 200 miles to the north. It is from this event, the *hijra* or migration, that Muslims date their calendar: a significant choice, since it marked neither the birth of a founder nor the beginning of the revelation, but rather the founding of a state.

In Mecca, Muhammad's followers had been distinguished from other citizens only by their religious beliefs and practices. But he went to Medina to assume a political role — that of arbiter between the clans whose feuds were almost destroying the city — and those Meccans who came with him to Medina were treated as a separate clan under his leadership. From now on, becoming a Muslim meant joining a community whose God-given law overrode tribal loyalties. Muslims were forbidden to attack other Muslims, or to support their own relatives in a blood-feud against other Muslims.

Muhammad soon proved himself a political and military leader of high ability. By the time of his death in AD 632 his community not only ruled Medina and Mecca but had become the dominant power in the Arabian peninsula. Within twenty years after that it had overthrown the Persian Empire and conquered all the Asiatic territories of the Roman Empire except Anatolia (modern Turkey). A hundred years after Muhammad's death a mighty empire stretched from the Punjab to the Pyrenees and from Samarkand to the Sahara.

The ruler of this empire, under God, was the caliph or 'successor to the Messenger of God'. But the caliphs were not successors to Muhammad as Messenger of God. In that capacity he could have no successor. The revelation made to him in the Koran completed and superseded those given to all earlier prophets and is valid for all humanity and for all time. Such at least is the belief of the overwhelming majority of Muslims, and those who do not believe it are not accepted as Muslims by those who do. The caliphs were Muhammad's successors not as Messenger but as 'commander of the faithful'. The first of them, Abu Bakr, had been appointed by Muhammad to lead the public prayers in his place during his last illness. But Abu Bakr owed his position as ruler to the decision

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of the leading members of the Muslim community, taken after Muhammad's death.

The early caliphs, therefore, may be said to have provided both spiritual and temporal leadership, in the sense that a Christian society would understand those terms. But the early Muslims made no distinction between the two. They assumed that only a holy man could provide good government for the community of God's servants, and that the main function of government was to ensure obedience to God's law as laid down in the Koran — though in practice the Koran had to be interpreted and even supplemented by the Tradition (*hadith*) about what Muhammad himself had said and done. If government was bad, that was not because holy men did not know how to govern, but because the governors were no longer holy. Thus political or social revolts were always justified in religious terms, and what to the modern historian look like dynastic squabbles over political power became deep schisms in religious doctrine.

In time, like other idealistic systems of government based on utopian principles, Islam was adapted by its adherents to take account of human imperfection. After the first few, most of the caliphs were obviously not men with any great spiritual qualifications, and owed their power either to brute force or to heredity. Moreover, in outlying parts of the empire they exercised no real authority. As conscience-keepers of the community they came to be replaced, or at least supplemented, by the *ulamā* or 'learned men' — those who studied deeply in the holy law and provided interpretations of it when difficult cases arose. Gradually, these learned men elaborated the rules derived from the Koran and the Tradition into a science of Muslim law. This law came to be regarded as the essence of the Sharī'a — the way of life ordained by God for mankind. For if the Christian's path to salvation lies through the acceptance and imitation of Christ, that of the Muslim lies through acceptance of and obedience to God's Law. The Law is made by God, not by man. The task of the learned jurists was not to make law, but to ascertain and expound it. It followed that not one of them could claim a monopoly of correct interpretation